

MODERN POETS  
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CHRISTIAN  
TEACHING

ROBERT  
BROWNING

FRANK C. LOCKWOOD



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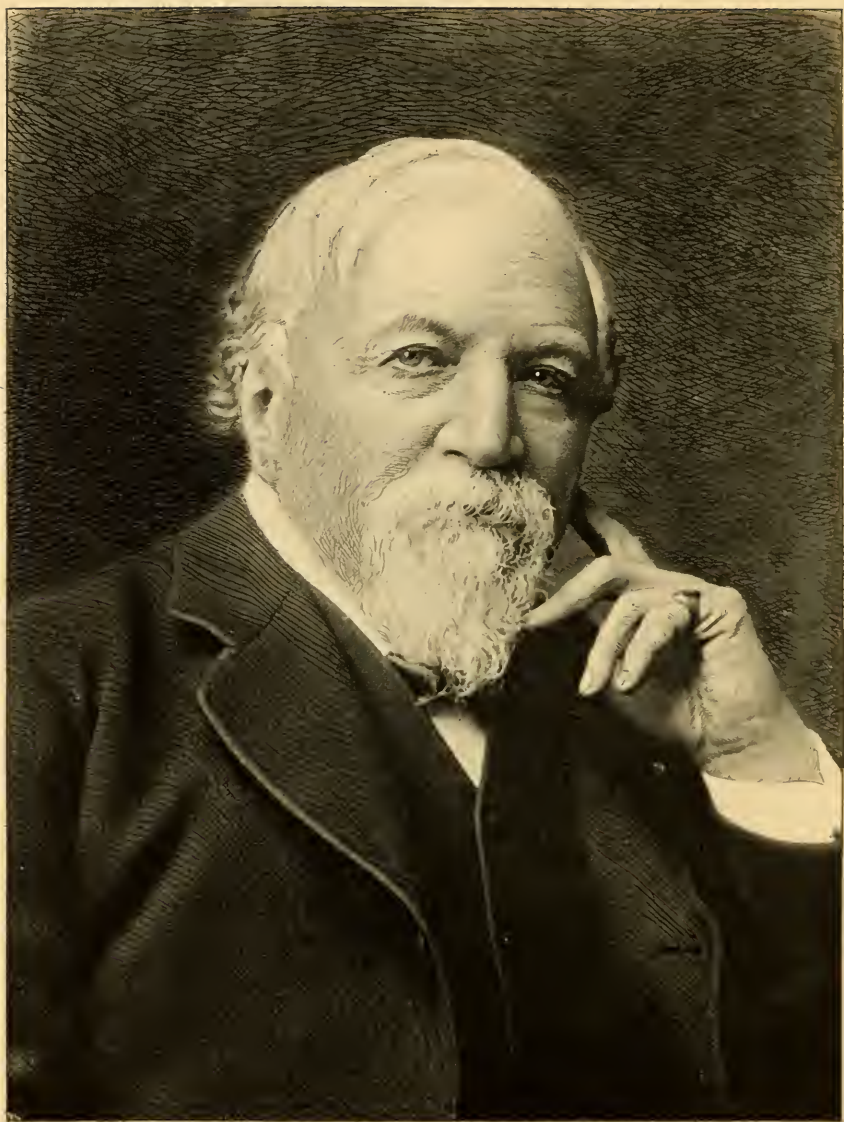
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*Robert Browning.*

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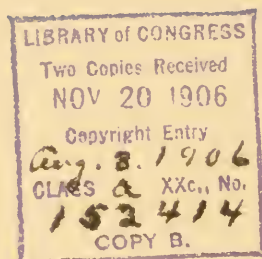
ROBERT BROWNING

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BY  
FRANK C. LOCKWOOD.



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THIS BOOK  
IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED  
TO  
MY WIFE



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## PREFACE

THE writer's aim in the preparation of this book has been a modest one. It has not been his purpose to enter into a technical and exhaustive study of Browning's poetry from either a philosophical or an artistic point of view. It has been his desire, rather, in as simple and lucid a manner as possible to present to serious readers a connected account of things fundamental that lie deeply bedded in Browning's life and poetry. The need of such a work is to be found in the undeniable fact that Browning is frequently difficult to understand and in the equally undeniable fact that there is much in him that is vastly worthy of being understood. It is the author's hope that he may, in some small measure, be instrumental in revealing to uninitiated or discouraged readers the rich veins of spiritual truth that are everywhere to be found in Browning's poetry at its best, and thus to impart to others what has been of inestimable value to himself.

The reader will find very little in the book outside of the quotations from Browning himself

that is either striking or original. The author takes pleasure in acknowledging his special obligation to the following books and authors, though there are many others that he has found helpful to him in his work: *Life and Letters of Robert Browning*, by Mrs. Sutherland Orr; *Browning as a Philosophical and Religious Teacher*, by Professor Henry Jones; *Robert Browning*, by Edward Dowden; *The Poetry of Robert Browning*, by Stopford A. Brooke; *Life of Browning*, by William Sharp; *Studies of the Mind and Art of Robert Browning*, by James Fotheringham; the *Essay of Professor Josiah Royce on Browning's Theism*, in the *Boston Browning Society Papers*, 1886-1897, and *Robert Browning: Personalalia*, by Edmund Gosse.

The writer has received no little aid and encouragement from Professor Lincoln R. Gibbs, and to him, also, he wishes to express his obligation.

F. C. L.

Meadville, Pennsylvania.

## CHAPTER I

### THE MAN BROWNING

Have you found your life distasteful?  
My life did and does smack sweet.  
Was your youth of pleasure wasteful?  
Mine I saved and hold complete.  
Do your joys with age diminish?  
When mine fail me, I'll complain.  
Must in death your daylight finish?  
My sun sets to rise again.

IF we would find access to the riches of Browning's genius we must first unlock the door of his personality—no easy thing to do. It is a difficult matter to read any character; much more that of a poet, and most of all that of such a poet as Browning. It was Wordsworth who remarked, when he first heard of Browning's clandestine marriage: "So Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett have gone off together! Well, I hope they may understand each other—nobody else could." Difficult as it may be, though, to fix his complex and illusive personality, we shall be well repaid for making the attempt, for it is impossible to study a poet's productions apart from his personality, or his personality apart from his productions.

They are vitally related, and one necessarily throws light upon the other.

There was nothing particularly distinctive of the poet in Browning's personal appearance or the outward circumstances of his life. There was no false glamour about the man; nothing meretricious or sensational, little that was even romantic or exceptional. He was not like Burns, afflicted with poverty or swayed by ill-regulated passions; nor like the proud, morbid, and willful Byron, given over to reckless and dissolute courses; nor like the visionary and ill-starred Shelley, consumed in the feverish pursuit of impossible ideals of beauty; nor like Keats, struck down in his young manhood with the dreams of his youth unfulfilled. He lacked the shyness and the somberness of Hawthorne, the picturesqueness and melancholy of Tennyson, and the leonine fury, titanic energy, and tumultuousness of Landor. His position in life was so assured, his fortunes so even, his circumstances so above pity and beneath envy, that his career seems commonplace rather than exciting and captivating. He had abundant means, devoted friends, untold riches of love, a career of his own choosing, long life, and abounding health. He was of "those whose blood and judgment are so well commingled that they are not a pipe for fortune's finger to sound what stop she please."



He was neither passion's slave nor yet the cold, pallid cynic who neither loves nor strives nor dares. He was, in short, a very Horatio of poets: "a man that fortune's buffets and rewards had ta'en with equal thanks."

Genealogies interest us little except as they touch the lives of men of genius; yet the man of genius, since he is the crowning product of his race, has small need of tracing a remote or illustrious ancestry. So it was with Browning. The luster of the name wanes by degrees through father, grandfather, and great-grandfather to be lost in the ranks of the sturdy common people of England. He was a descendant of an obscure South of England Anglo-Saxon family. I do not doubt that much of the freshness and vigor so characteristic of his genius was due to the fact that he came of an unspoiled and hardy race that had always remained in close contact with the soil, and had thus suffered no waste of elemental power through luxury or the overrefinements of artificial society. His opulence and versatility of mind, on the other hand, no doubt came from the remote and diverse strains of blood that flowed from German, Scotch, and Creole sources; for while his paternal grandfather was of solid English ancestry his paternal grandmother was a Creole, his maternal grandfather a German,

and his maternal grandmother a Scotch woman. Such a descent certainly provides abundant possibilities for strength and ardor, vigor and variety of endowment.

In more than one description of Browning, written before he had reached middle life, there are flattering references to his personal beauty and charm of manner. A friend who had been his classmate for a short time when Browning was about eighteen years of age writes: "He was then a bright, handsome youth, with long black hair falling over his shoulders." William Sharp, one of his biographers, says of him: "Everyone who met Browning in those early years of his buoyant manhood seems to have been struck by his comeliness and simple grace of manner. Macready stated that he looked more like a poet than any man he had ever met. As a young man he appears to have had a certain ivory delicacy of coloring, what an old friend, perhaps somewhat exaggeratedly, described to me as an almost flowerlike beauty, which passed ere long into a less girlish and more robust complexion. He appeared taller than he was—for he was not above medium height—partly because of his rare grace of movement and partly from a characteristic high poise of the head when listening intently to music or conversation."

Bayard Taylor's picture of Browning as he appeared at the age of thirty-nine is one of the most precise and satisfying that has been preserved for us: "In a small drawing-room on the first floor I met Browning, who received me with great cordiality. In his lively, cheerful manner, quick voice, and perfect self-possession, he made the impression of an American rather than an Englishman. He was then, I should judge, about thirty-seven years of age, but his dark hair was already streaked with gray about the temples. His complexion was fair, with perhaps the faintest olive tinge, eyes large, clear, and gray, nose strong and well cut, mouth full and rather broad, and chin pointed, though not prominent. His forehead broadened rapidly upward from the outer angle of the eyes, slightly retreating. The strong individuality which marks his poetry was expressed not only in his face and head but in his whole demeanor. He was about the medium height, strong in the shoulders but slender at the waist, and his movements expressed a combination of vigor and elasticity."

It must be confessed that some of these more flattering delineations of Browning are at variance with our familiar conception of him as he came and went among men in his mature years. From all accounts he might easily have been mistaken

for a retired sea captain, a successful American business man, or a genial medical practitioner. Most of his portraits argue strongly against the tradition of extreme manly beauty, though one and all reveal a strong, interesting, and aggressive personality. But we may accept Hawthorne's dictum that in youth all things are beautiful, and easily fit our minds to the belief that the creator of "Saul" and "Pippa Passes" could not have been other than an attractive man in both person and spirit.

From early childhood Browning was reared in an atmosphere of poetry and refinement. His mother inherited a love of music and his father was hardly less gifted than the poet himself. He was a wide reader and was passionately fond of books, especially of Greek literature; he was possessed of much skill, and still greater talent, as an artist, and was supremely endowed with all great qualities of manhood. He sang Greek lullabies to the infant Browning, and he was himself no mean poet. With such parents, and with such home surroundings, it was not wonderful that the boy began very early to make verses. By the time he was twelve years of age he had produced a volume of poetry in the Byronic manner which must have had real merit and given great promise, for both his father and mother were willing to have it

published. He wrote the manuscript out in a fair boyish hand, and used all his persuasive arts to get it printed, but, fortunately, without avail. We are now permitted to apply directly to "Sordello" and "Red Cotton Night-Cap Country" energies that might otherwise have been impaired by an exhaustive effort to appraise the tragic utterances of a world-weary genius of twelve.

The spell of Byron was a dominant one while it lasted; but Browning's authentic call to a life of poetry came two or three years later, when he had nearly completed his fourteenth year. At that time he was as irrevocably sealed to poetry as was Wordsworth in that high moment of feeling and resolve when, after a night of youthful revelry, as the morning rose in memorable pomp and drenched the mountains about him in empyrean light, he felt that vows had been made for him, and bond unknown, that he should, else sinning greatly, be a dedicated spirit; and when he

Conversed with promises, had glimmering views  
How life pervades the undecaying mind;  
How the immortal soul with godlike power  
Informs, creates, and thaws the deepest sleep  
That time can lay upon her; how on earth  
Man, if he do but live within the light  
Of high endeavor, daily spreads abroad  
His being, armed with strength that cannot fail.

Browning's dedication was scarcely less solemn



and final. By a happy accident he fell upon the works of Shelley and, through him, upon those of Keats also. He had not even known that such poets had poured out their heart's blood in English song. But having once caught the note of Shelley's music, and gained a glimpse of the ethereal realm that he inhabited, his soul was entranced, and the spirit of true poetry took possession of him for evermore. And scarcely less potent than the exhilarating ecstasy of Shelley's strains was the intoxication of beauty that flowed in the verse of Keats. But Shelley mastered him more completely than did Keats. His voice came like the call of an eagle from the blue depths above to its prisoned eaglet upon the earth. His influence proved stimulating and lasting, and loosened once for all his pinioned soul for imaginative flights of song.

Browning's education was conducted chiefly at home, though it was greatly enlarged by travel. He was fond of saying Italy was his university; and this assertion was far from untrue. His passion for Italy was romantic, single, and unfailing; and Italy repaid his admiration with all high gifts of art and natural beauty and grandeur of storied and immemorial past. Truly, if we had explored to the "red-ripe" of his heart, we should have found Italy graven there. No foreigner knew its

cities and bays and mountains and valleys better than he; no scholar had read its tragic, complex, and melancholy past more deeply than he; no poet more subtly and adequately read its record of heroism and passion than he.

But Italy was not the only foreign country that attracted him and that contributed to his education. He did not, to be sure, visit the Orient, as he desired to do and dreamed of doing; nor did he ever cross the Atlantic and acquaint himself with our country, though Americans were among the earliest to appreciate his verse, and though many of his ardent and valued friends were Americans. He early journeyed to Russia, and brought away with him lasting and picturesque impressions of its social life and its interminable snow-clad forests. Frequently he made long stays in France, reading and enjoying the eager and multitudinous life of Paris, permitting others to meet and lionize him, and recuperating in remote hamlets or fishing villages. To be sure, his travels were not wide, but they were interested and fruitful; and he was less insular than most English poets—than Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Tennyson, for example. This is abundantly proven by the fact that a great many of his finest poems have been taken to heart by the French and the Italians as among the most interpretative and sympathetic

of the poems concerning their national life. After all, though, he was an Englishman, and it is not difficult to believe him when he sings:

I cherish most  
My love of England—how her name, a word  
Of hers in a strange tongue, makes my heart beat!

Browning had few playmates in his childhood, and few companions in his early youth. His life in this respect, like that of Ruskin, was so restricted as to be almost unhealthful. As he grew toward manhood, though, his social nature asserted itself, and he made many enduring attachments. In nothing is the breadth of his nature better shown than in this capacity for friendship. He was as opulent in friends as he was in character and genius, and his intimacies were limited by neither age, sex, nationality, nor occupation. Among his earliest attachments were those that bound him to the gifted and noble-hearted Alfred Domett and his cousins, the Silverthornes. But as his genius came to be recognized his circle of friends rapidly widened, extending gradually from the coterie of literary men with whom he had early established pleasant relationships until it came to include all sorts and conditions of people. He possessed a strong social instinct, and with this a nature wholly manly, generous, and devoid of envy. He was quick to discern, and ardent to



acknowledge, greatness in others; and in consequence he numbered among his stanchest friends men he might easily have antagonized and turned into bitter foes. Carlyle, for instance, was so volcanic and censorious that he could scarcely refrain from pouring the vials of his wrath upon friend and foe alike, threatening thus the eternal destruction of all mankind. He was not in reality excessively harsh or vindictive, but he often left that impression. Landor, too, the untamed royal Bengal tiger among poets, even in his extreme old age quarreled with every friend and relative he had on earth—to say nothing of such as he had sent to an untimely grave. But Browning was so quick to see the noble qualities in his associates, and so disposed to overlook what was petty or ignoble in them, that he retained the cordial friendship of both of these men throughout life, even ministering to them like a son in their old age and misfortune. Among Englishmen, besides the two great men I have named, he enjoyed throughout life the devoted attachment of men as unlike as Tennyson, Dickens, Rossetti, Kenyon, Forster, and Mill; among Frenchmen, such men as Joseph Milsand and the Comte de Ripert-Monclar; among Americans, such men as Story, Hawthorne, Hillard, and Bayard Taylor; and among Italians, such statesmen and patriots as

Cavour and Mazzini. Nor is it strange that what was finest and truest in him should have been developed through the happy comradeship of women, for he was the exemplar and champion of all that high-minded women hold dear, and united in himself an abounding vitality of healthy manhood with a passionate and exalted devotion to the finest ideals of romantic love. He is read even now more constantly and widely by women than by men; his chief biographer has been a woman; he first won the love of Elizabeth Barrett through a bold and romantic friendship. Says Mrs. Sutherland Orr, his biographer: "He avowedly preferred the society of women to that of men; they were, as I have already said, his habitual confidantes, and evidently his most frequent correspondents."

It is, though, only in the inner sanctuary of the poet's domestic affections that we shall breathe the true fragrance of his manhood. His nature—though at times too assertive and brusque—was in reality exquisitely ardent and tender. His love for his mother was an absorbing passion. Even up to mature manhood he invariably treated her with boyish devotion and tenderness. The story of the chivalric love he bore his wife has been so often, and so touchingly, celebrated that I need only allude to it. A passion so pure, so ideal, so

unselfish, if treated at all, should be treated with classical delicacy and restraint. The experience is best embalmed in their own love-poetry. There the initiated and sympathetic may read it with greater satisfaction, surely, than in their biographies or their correspondence. It is, one is constrained to say, a record that enriches history, glorifies human nature, and adds to our store of confidence in the ultimate possibilities of the race. The exalting and consecrating power of this love upon the life of Robert Browning may be read in the poet's lyrical outburst in the early part of "The Ring and the Book," beginning:

O lyric Love, half angel and half bird,  
And all a wonder and a wild desire,—  
Boldest of hearts that ever braved the sun,  
Took sanctuary within the holier blue,  
And sang a kindred soul out to his face,—  
Yet human at the red-ripe of the heart—  
When the first summons from the darkling earth  
Reached thee amid thy chambers, blanched their blue,  
And bared them of the glory—to drop down,  
To toil for man, to suffer or to die,—  
This is the same voice; can thy soul know change?  
Hail then, and hearken from the realms of help!  
Never may I commence my song, my due  
To God who best taught song by gift of thee,  
Except with bent head and beseeching hand—  
That still, despite the distance and the dark,  
What was, again may be; some interchange  
Of grace, some splendor once thy very thought,  
Some benediction anciently thy smile:  
—Never conclude, but raising hand and head

Thither where eyes, that cannot reach, yet yearn  
For all hope, all sustainment, all reward,  
Their utmost up and on,—so blessing back  
In those thy realms of help, that heaven thy home,  
Some whiteness which, I judge, thy face makes proud,  
Some wanness where, I think, thy foot may fall!

Though Browning pursued no regular college or university course, his preparation fitted him almost ideally for the life of a poet. His home surroundings were stimulating and refining, his religious and moral training unexceptionable; he grew up with the Bible, the Greek sages and singers, and the Elizabethan poets; he was instructed in music and drawing and all manly and wholesome physical exercises; he had access to Nature, and from early youth sought solitary communion with her both by night and day, at the same time dwelling near enough the city of London to catch the pulsings of its mighty heart, and to translate the mystery and pathos of its notes of human joy and woe. Later he added the wealth of wisdom and insight that comes from travel; and anon the inspiring converse of great poets, and actors, and critics, and artists, and high-souled men of the world. And last of all he was caught up and transfigured by a great and heroic love which continued its chastening and exalting power over him long after the object of that passion had been taken from him.

His was a restless and tireless nature. His energy knew no bounds, and the opulence and versatility of his genius was surprising. His reading was eager, wide-ranging, and omnivorous; and his exact and tenacious memory rendered all that he read available. Apart from his wide familiarity with the literature of his own day, his easy mastery of the Elizabethan poets, and his intimate acquaintance with classic authors, few men were more at home with the literature of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The Renaissance, indeed, alike in its intellectual, its humanistic, and its religious interest, fairly lives again in his poetry. He wrote as diligently as he read, producing, as we have seen, a volume of poetry while still a boy; and no sooner had he reached the verge of young manhood than he set himself the gigantic task of writing "a series of monodramatic epics, narratives of the lives of typical souls." This particular plan he never carried out, though in spirit he was true to it throughout his life, setting to work immediately and writing two such studies of the souls of great men—"Pauline" and "Paracelsus"—before his twenty-fifth year. But he did not limit himself to literature. He loved music, and spent so much time cultivating it that he became an excellent pianist. He was much interested in art also, and made drawings of no little merit. In



the early days of his association with the artists and men of letters who became his lifelong friends he was thought of more as an artist and musician than as a poet. While residing in Italy after his marriage he devoted himself for a considerable time to modeling in clay, under the guidance of his American friend, Mr. Story, and his success in this field of art showed that he might have achieved distinction as a sculptor. Mr. Sharp, speaking of him during the ripe autumnal period of his life, says: "His avocations were so manifold that it is difficult to understand where he had leisure for his vocation. Everybody wished him to come to dine; and he did his utmost to gratify everybody. He saw everything; read all the notable books; kept himself acquainted with the leading contents of the journals and magazines; conducted a large correspondence; read new French, German, and Italian books of mark; read and translated Euripides and Æschylus; knew all the gossip of the literary clubs, salons, and the studios; was a frequenter of afternoon tea parties; and then, over and above it all, he was Browning: the most profoundly subtle mind that has exercised itself in poetry since Shakespeare."

Intense, energetic, and many-sided as it was, Browning's character was not particularly elusive or complex. He stood in the open with manly

simplicity and set forth his scheme of life and uttered his conviction without fear or favor. In many respects he was very old-fashioned in his habits and interests, and in his disregard of custom, even, he often veered toward convention. He was in all essentials a middle-class nineteenth century Englishman; a poet, a thinker, a man of genius, but sturdily orthodox and common-sense. He eloped with Elizabeth Barrett, but in so doing he was pursuing a higher law of conduct than any social code could exact; and he solemnly and duly availed himself of the established rites of the church. He has written much about gypsies, and has imaginatively treated the lives of gypsies in his poetry, but I have scant faith in the legend that he sometimes shared the vagrant life of the gypsies. He has disavowed the forms and dogmas of Christianity, but in his feelings, his habits, and even in his impassioned utterances we find him adhering strictly to all the essentials of Christianity.

We are almost startled sometimes to read in such poems as "Confessions," "The Statue and the Bust," and "Fifine at the Fair" what seems very much like the avowal of doctrines of free love; yet we know that he held strict—one may say puritanical—ideals of domestic virtue, and had an almost uncontrollable aversion to George Sand

and her coterie—indeed, to the whole tribe of freethinkers, free-lovers, and Bohemian artists.

It is, I think, just because of the simplicity and impulsiveness of his nature that Browning is hard to fix in a character delineation. We are disposed to set cautiously to work to entrap a subtle and serious philosopher in his dark ways when in reality we have to do with a joyous, boisterous, frank-hearted boy. We set about analyzing his secret as a conversationalist and are surprised to find that he talks at random, or excitedly, to cover his embarrassment, or impulsively, under the genial stimulus of a friendly group. And when struck with admiration for his easy social bearing, graceful manner, and happy repartee we discover that these fine achievements are heaven-sent accidents brought about to save a modest and nervous man from social snares that would have entrapped his trembling soul to perdition. Certain it is, at any rate, that Browning was ardent, excitable, and impulsive. His sensitive nature and sense of respect for the sacred things of the soul led him to delicate reserves, but usually he was the most frank and communicative of men—laying open his own foibles to the world with the consciousness, doubtless, that they would receive the more lenient treatment thereby. In conversation he was at his best when excited to forgetful



monologue by a friend or a friendly circle; and he confesses that all through life so great was his nervous trepidation at the thought of facing some ordinary social exigency that he could not have been convinced of his ability to bear it off successfully had he not had the proof of former experiences to assure him that he could do it.

The same ingenuousness and temperamental ardor of which I have spoken goes far to explain another strong tendency of Browning's nature—namely, his occasional indignant outbursts of wrath. He says of himself in one of his poems, "I was ever a fighter," but we naturally connect this statement with the magnificent intellectual and spiritual conflicts in which we know Browning engaged; and we feel surprised at occasional uncontrolled outbursts of anger such as were elicited by Macready's treatment of him and Fitzgerald's criticism of his wife's poetry, and at his impassioned denunciation of the charlatan who sought to write a garbled biography of his wife for commercial purposes. His feelings were so strong, and his convictions so firm, that when argument failed, and will power was unavailing, he was likely to resort either to consuming wrath or pained and grim silence. Such outbursts were not, however, out of harmony with a tender and gentle heart; for in the reaction from such moods these fundamental

qualities of his nature were frequently most apparent; so it is evident that impulse and uncontrolled nervous excitement must account for them.

It is interesting to be admitted to the workshop of a man of genius—to know how, and when, and where he calls his beautiful beings into life. Browning's biographers say little about his habits as a poet. We do, though, have some accounts of the outdoor life of the young poet that are suggestive and artistically satisfying. In his early youth he was fond of resorting to a secluded spot on Herne Hill, where, in the shade cast by three noble elms, he could lie, looking off upon the city of London, and dream away the hours. It was during a night visit to this secluded resort that the call of humanity first made its imaginative appeal to his sympathies and awoke in him the desire and the determination to be its interpreter. During the early years of his manhood he lived much out of doors, and even, like Wordsworth, composed aloud in the open air. He was much given to extended night walks; frequently, after writing until far into the night, he would walk out thus, alone, and remain to watch the dawn. His favorite resort at this time was a wood at no great distance from Camberwell, and it was during his solitary night watches here that he began more and more deeply to enter into the human life that pulsed so

restlessly in the smoky, mist-wreathed city at his feet. He was, too, a wonderfully acute observer of nature, even to its most minute processes, and no one can fully appreciate the delicate realism of some of his descriptions of insects, flowers, and birds until he has a picture of him, on some sunshiny holiday, lying breathless and motionless in the grass, or beside some hedge, watching the unconscious life about him with the eye of a Thoreau.

"I have heard him say," says Mr. Sharp, "that his faculty of observation at that time would not have appeared despicable to a Seminole or an Iroquois; he saw and watched everything, the bird on the wing, the snail dragging its shell up the pendulous woodbine, the bee adding to his golden treasure as he swung in the bells of the campanula, the green fly darting hither and thither like an animated seedling, the spider weaving her gossamer from twig to twig, the woodpecker heedfully scrutinizing the lichen on the gnarled oak-bole, the passage of the wind through leaves or across grass, the motions and shadows of the clouds, and so forth."

He had throughout life a decided fondness for animals and an intimate knowledge of their haunts and habits. His democratic tastes in his animal friendships I cannot but reprehend. Sometimes during his boyhood his mother could

not persuade him to take a disagreeable medicine until she had promised to catch a frog for him by way of reward; and when he grew old enough to provide his own menagerie it contained owls, snakes, monkeys, parrots, an eagle, hedgehogs, magpies, toads, and lizards. The creatures would frequently be brought home in his pockets and be consigned to his mother's care. He could at any time lure a lizard into the sunshine by whistling a peculiar call; and we have accounts of him, as an old man, amusing himself in this way as he walked about the highways and byways of the lovely little Italian village of Asolo. When the poet's father moved to Hatcham, about 1835, Browning not only had the enjoyment of his uncle's horse, York—the hero of Browning's most stirring ballad of the saddle—but also the companionship of a pet toad, which would follow him about in his walks, and would come out of its hole when Browning indicated his presence by dropping gravel into its retreat.

Throughout life Browning was a man of robust health and overflowing vitality. First, last, and midmost, as we read his works, or read works about him, is this impression of vivid healthfulness and abounding life. His father was a man of flawless physical constitution, having never known sickness during his long life of eighty-four years.

From him Browning no doubt inherited his fine endurance and vigor. From his mother, on the other hand, he received his highly charged nervous temperament and extreme sensitiveness to physical stimuli. However this may be, no one met him without feeling the impression of his splendid health and optimism. His voice was strong, vibrant, and cheering; his handshake gave one the sense of an electric shock; and his physical magnetism either attracted or repelled whomsoever he approached. Elizabeth Barrett felt that from the moment he entered her darkened chamber his presence meant life, not death. But upon others his personality had quite the opposite effect. The story is told of an old lady with somewhat troublesome nerves, at an afternoon reception, who arose to leave with some abruptness, excusing herself to her hostess for her early departure by explaining that the voice and proximity of "a too exuberant financier" affected her "like a mild attack of pins and needles." Her discomfiture may be imagined when she was informed that the obnoxious personality was that of Robert Browning. There is present all through his poetry, too, the ringing note of joy in mere sensuous existence, as when in "Saul" he breaks forth into lusty song:

Oh, our manhood's prime vigor! No spirit feels waste,  
Not a muscle is stopped in its playing nor sinew unbraced.

Oh, the wild joys of living! the leaping from rock up to rock,  
The strong rending of boughs from the fir-tree, the cool  
silver shock

Of the plunge in a pool's living water, the hunt of the bear,  
And the sultriness showing the lion is couched in his lair.

And the meal, the rich dates yellowed over with gold dust  
divine,

And the locust-flesh steeped in the pitcher, the full draught  
of wine,

And the sleep in the dried river-channel where bulrushes tell  
That the water was wont to go warbling so softly and well.  
How good is man's life, the mere living! how fit to employ  
All the heart and the soul and the senses forever in joy!



## CHAPTER II

### BROWNING'S WAY TO TRUTH

Wholly distrust thy knowledge, then, and trust  
As wholly love allied to ignorance!  
There lies thy truth and safety.

WE begin our study of Browning's philosophy of life with an inquiry into his theory of knowledge. And at the very outset we are perplexed because we have two Brownings to deal with: one the confident, inspired Browning of early and middle life—the creator of "Abt Vogler," "Andrea del Sarto," "Saul," "Rabbi Ben Ezra," and "The Ring and the Book"—the poet Browning in the plenitude of his power; the other the Browning whom old age had subdued to the philosophic temper—writing under the guidance of reason rather than of imagination, caring more for the intellectual than for the artistic quality of his verse—the author of "La Saisiaz," "Ferishtah's Fancies," "Parleyings," and "Asolando"; the casuist and metaphysician. The product of the first period is far richer in content and more artistic in form than the product of the second period. He was then in the free exercise of the poetic function; and the function of the poet I

deem far higher than that of the scientist or philosopher—higher, even, than that of the preacher. The poet is the seer. Reality to him is one and whole and convincing. It presents itself to him not merely as truth, or beauty, or righteousness, but as all these at once. His nature exerts itself fully, spontaneously, and harmoniously; and in consequence he represents humanity at its best.

It was so with Browning; and, as we turn to his earlier works to trace there his theory of knowledge, we find wise, sane, and stimulating utterances concerning man's power to grasp and understand truth. He turns to God as the center of intelligence and the source of all knowledge:

This is the glory,—that in all conceived,  
Or felt or known, I recognize a mind  
Not mine but like mine,—for the double joy,—  
Making all things for me and me for Him.

---

Yet my poor spark had for its source the sun;  
Thither I sent the great looks which compel  
Light from its fount: all that I do and am  
Comes from the truth, or seen or else surmised,  
Remembered or divined, as mere man may.

Man, as he is created in God's mental as well as moral image, is the organ of divine intelligence, and succeeds only as he relies upon his Creator. Though not coerced, he is urged on to attainment and endeavor by the spirit that energizes within



him. Says the young Paracelsus as he sets out upon his life quest for universal truth:

I go to prove my soul!  
I see my way as birds their trackless way.  
I shall arrive! what time, what circuit first,  
I ask not: but unless God send his hail  
Or blinding fireballs, sleet or stifling snow,  
In some time, his good time, I shall arrive:  
He guides me and the bird. In his good time!

Nor is man's knowledge limited to God and himself. He has access also to an orderly world outside himself, and enjoys community of knowledge with those about him. Knowledge has objective validity—so far at least as man's limited vision extends, for he does not assert that human knowledge is absolute. It is trustworthy as far as it goes—as all other finite powers are—but it is not such fullness of knowledge as is possessed by the Absolute. He sees as God sees, and pursues safely the path that God points out, but he cannot see so far as God sees, nor trust himself out of the circle of light shed by the divine:

Man is not God, but hath God's end to serve,  
A master to obey, a course to take,  
Somewhat to cast off, somewhat to become.

---

Man, therefore, stands on his own stock  
Of love and power as a pin-point rock,  
And looks to God, who ordained divorce  
Of the rock from his boundless continent.

Man has no reason, however, to be dismayed or discouraged because he has not yet attained to perfect knowledge. For progress is the law of his being, and if it is not yet given him fully to apprehend, he may with all confidence reach toward the prize of his high endeavor. For his knowledge constantly broadens. What he could not know to-day he may know to-morrow, and what to-morrow withholds a more distant future is sure to yield. Youth, with its errors and doubts and passions, is interpreted in the light of the placid knowledge that comes in old age; and what death leaves us in ignorance of is to be achieved by the soul in its wide-ranging conquests in other worlds after it has freed itself from the alloy of flesh:

Therefore I summon age  
To grant youth's heritage,  
Life's struggle having so far reached its term:  
Thence shall I pass, approved  
A man, for aye removed  
From the developed brute; a God though in the germ.

And I shall thereupon  
Take rest, ere I be gone  
Once more on my adventure brave and new:  
Fearless and unperplexed,  
When I wage battle next,  
What weapons to select, what armor to indue.

So spake the poet and the seer in Browning.  
And how disappointing to turn, from such large,

confident, and luminous teachings concerning man's power to know, to a consideration of the perverse and erroneous doctrines set forth by Browning in his old age, after he had lapsed from the privileged estate of the poet and entered upon the effort to establish his philosophy of life in accordance with strictly speculative methods. As our chief interest in these pages, however, is with Browning the philosopher, rather than with Browning the poet, we must now busy ourselves with his later, more systematic, and more ambitious views concerning a theory of knowledge.

And we may as well admit at once that, considered from the standpoint of speculative reason, Browning's philosophy went to pieces upon just this rock. Browning is an out-and-out philosophical skeptic. He does not trust man's intellectual powers, nor see any good ground to hope that man can enter into sure possession of the world of reality around him. He utterly discredits human knowledge, and with rare subtlety and dialectical skill sets about to undermine the edifice of pure reason. He casts doubt upon the possibility of man's ever rearing a safe structure upon the foundation of intellect alone. It is not that the finite mind is unable to grasp reality in its fullness. That would be merely to assert that human knowledge is incomplete—that progress

is the law of its nature. His skepticism goes much deeper than this. He questions the trustworthiness of human reason. He does not believe that reason is adequate to enter the realm of universal truth and win sure victories there. He maintains that by nature it is deceptive and illusory. It makes and unmakes its shadowy world. It weaves cobwebs between the finite mind and the world of ultimate reality, now mistaking these figments for truth and anon perceiving them to be false. His assertion of agnosticism is at its worst appalling in its force and completeness. In "A Pillar at Sebzevar" he says:

Wholly distrust thy knowledge, then, and trust  
As wholly love allied to ignorance!  
There lies thy truth and safety.

And, again, in "Francis Furini":

Thus much at least is clearly understood—  
Of power does Man possess no particle:  
Of knowledge—just so much as shows that still  
It ends in ignorance on every side.

Browning denies even that he has access to a common world of experience with his fellow men. So far as knowledge is concerned he is shut within the narrow limits of his own subjective world. He knows nothing assuredly except that he himself exists, that his world of inner consciousness is visited by sensations of pain and pleasure, and

that God exists outside of and above him. He can speak out for himself, but "nowise dare play the spokesman for" his "brothers strong and weak." There is no objective world of valid truth, no meeting place of fact and experience, no external test of knowledge. Each one sees and reports for himself. Different individuals may even observe the same fact yet disagree utterly in their report of it. The outside world offers merely

Conjecture manifold,

But, as knowledge, this comes only—things may be as  
I behold,

Or may not be, but, without me and above me, things there  
are;

I myself am what I know not—ignorance which proves  
no bar

To the knowledge that I am, and since I am, can recog-  
nize

What to me is pain and pleasure: this is sure, the rest—  
surmise.

If my fellows are or are not, what may please them and  
what pain,—

Mere surmise: my own experience—that is knowledge, once  
again!

---

Knowledge stands on my experience: all outside is narrow  
hem,

Free surmise may sport and welcome! Pleasures, pains  
affect mankind

Just as they affect myself? Why, here's my neighbor  
color blind,

Eyes like mine, to all appearance: "green as grass" do I  
affirm?

"Red as grass" he contradicts me: which employs the proper  
term?

But not even here does Browning stay his misguided course. He pushes resolutely forward into the realm of conduct and throws confusion over man's moral nature. He teaches that it is as impossible to know the good as it is to know the true. In this wilderness of nescience into which he has strangely stumbled he not only sets men to pursue phantoms of reality that forever elude them—now appearing to be truth, and now to be falsehood—but he condemns them as well to wage unending warfare with the shadows of good and evil, and leaves them in perpetual doubt as to which way the battle has gone. He holds that the conflicts of life

teach

What good is and what evil,—just the same,  
Be feigning or be fact the teacher,

and asserts that

Here and there a touch

Taught me, betimes, the artifice of things—  
That all about, external to myself,  
Was meant to be suspected,—not revealed  
Demonstrably a cheat,—but half seen through.

It is hard to understand how a thinker of Browning's subtlety and acumen could have held such false and contradictory doctrines as we have just deduced. If, however, we proceed a step farther with him in his attempt to understand and



interpret reality, restraining ourselves for the present from any attempt to condemn or criticise him, we shall see why it was that he degraded the human intellect and repudiated the possibility of an intelligible world about us. In an oft-quoted sentence, to be found in the introduction to "Sordello," Browning says: "My stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study." No single utterance of Browning's could better suggest to us the point of departure for his philosophy of life. His interest centered in the spiritual life of man. The moral struggle of humanity in its upward progress from dust to divinity—this it was that, throughout his long career as a poet, riveted his attention, challenged his intellect, and suggested to his creative imagination endless situations for artistic treatment.

This world's no blot for us  
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:  
To find its meaning is my meat and drink.

This was Browning's note from the first. And if now we keep steadfastly in mind his supreme interest in the spiritual welfare of man, and his unwavering faith that the universe in which we live is in its inmost nature a good universe—if, in other words, we bear in mind that, first, last, and always, Browning's dominating passion was his optimistic faith—we shall be able to see more

clearly why it was that he deemed it necessary to rear his cloudy and threatening world of skepticism over against his radiant world of faith. It was because he saw no other way to justify his optimism, and was compelled to seek a deeper principle than knowledge upon which to ground his philosophy—that of universal love; discarding knowledge utterly except as a background of illusion, deception, and uncertainty. Ignorance is necessary, he maintains, for the development of the moral life:

I have lived, then, done and suffered, loved and hated,  
learnt and taught  
This—there is no reconciling wisdom with a world distraught,  
Goodness with triumphant evil, power with failure in the aim,  
If—(to my own sense, remember! though none other feel the same!)  
If you bar me from assuming earth to be a pupil's place,  
And life, time,—with all their chances, changes,—just probation space,  
Mine, for me.

It is only through ignorance of what is true and what is false that we are able to make moral choices; for if we infallibly knew one course to be evil and the other course to be good, we would choose the good course and avoid the evil one. And there could be no merit in doing what we were obliged to do any more than there would be fault



in doing what was equally compulsory. The moral life would thus come to a standstill, and man would no longer be man, for Browning

Finds progress man's distinctive mark alone.

Struggle—the passage from what is lower to what is higher, or, for that matter, struggle whether it issue in victory or defeat, since Browning thought one scarcely more praiseworthy than the other, if only the battle had been bravely fought—struggle is the very essence of man's nature.

Think!

Could I see plain, be somehow certified  
All was illusion,—evil far and wide  
Was good disguised,—why, out with one huge wipe  
Goes knowledge from me. Type needs antitype:  
As night needs day, as shine needs shade, so good  
Needs evil: how were pity understood  
Unless by pain? Make evident that pain  
Permissibly masks pleasure—you abstain  
From outstretch of the finger-tip that saves  
A drowning fly.

In "A Death in the Desert"—as the dying John talks with the watchers who have gathered about him to hear concerning the Christ, whom he had known in the flesh—the relation between knowledge and conduct is emphasized in a unique way. John points out to them that, if the soul could know the prosperous course with as much certainty as the bodily wants, such as cold, hunger, and

thirst, get themselves satisfied when they come within reach of what they instinctively feel to be their gain, then man's probation would be at an end. His distinctive function as man would be over with, once for all. For it is for man to reason and decide. He must weigh and then choose. Would he give up fire for gold or rich apparel if he had once come to know its worth? asks Browning.

Could he give Christ up were His worth as plain?  
Therefore, I say, to test man, the proofs shift,  
Nor may he grasp that fact like other facts,  
And straightway in his life acknowledge it,  
As, say, the indubitable bliss of fire.

But, interrupt his friends, surely it must have been easier for you to believe in Christ, who walked in daily conversation and communion with him in the flesh, than for us at this remote time. Not at all, replies the dying apostle. I am left alive to show you that such was not the case, for is it not recorded of me I "forsook and fled"? If I had known Christ's worth, as my hand knows warmth and seeks it when cold, how could it have been possible that the torchlight and the noise and "the sudden Roman faces, violent hands, and fear of what the Jews might do" could have availed to separate me from him? That was my trial, he continues, and that was the way it ended.

But be sure (and here Browning clinches his peculiar doctrine) my soul gained its truth from the experience—would henceforth grow—and from that time forth so forceful did the lesson become upon my lips, and in my whole life, that there was no little child or tender woman, notwithstanding that they had never seen for themselves the least thing of all that I had seen,

Who did not clasp the cross with a light laugh,  
Or wrap the burning robe round, thanking God.

In the "Epistle of Karshish" Browning flashes the same truth upon us from a slightly different angle. Here he wishes to show that perfect knowledge would be out of proportion with the temporal and finite order in which man must find his place so long as he remains upon earth. Lazarus, after his recovery from the tomb, knows too much. He has had a vision of how things proceed behind the veil, and the revelation has all but blasted his human understanding. There seems to be utter lack of adjustment between his open-eyed vision of absolute truth, as it had been made known to him while his spirit existed apart from the body, and the requirements of human action and judgment. Occurrences that seem of supreme importance to those about him he ignores or disregards, and trifling circumstances or insignificant incidents

arouse him to sudden horror or excitement. Plainly his view of "things-as-they-are" had upset all his human standards of knowledge and conduct so that he was spoiled for ordinary mortal pursuits. What to other men appeared evil he—seeing it in its ultimate bearings—counted good; and what to the ordinary man appeared innocent or harmless, to him, by virtue of his perfect intelligence, appeared momentous. He was, thus, practically incapacitated from discharging the moral functions of manhood.

So here—we call the treasure knowledge, say,  
 Increased beyond the fleshly faculty—  
 Heaven opened to a soul while yet on earth,  
 Earth forced on a soul's use while seeing heaven:  
 The man is witless of the size, the sum,  
 The value in proportion of all things,  
 Or whether it be little or be much.  
 Discourse to him of prodigious armaments  
 Assembled to besiege his city now,  
 And of the passing of a mule with gourds—  
 'Tis one! Then take it on the other side,  
 Speak of some trifling fact,—he will gaze rapt  
 With stupor at its very littleness,  
 (Far as I see) as if in that indeed  
 He caught prodigious import, whole results;  
 And so will turn to us the bystanders  
 In ever the same stupor (note this point)  
 That we too see not with his opened eyes.  
 Wonder and doubt come wrongly into play,  
 Preposterously, at cross purposes.  
 Should his child sicken unto death,—why, look  
 For scarce abatement of his cheerfulness,  
 Or pretermission of the daily craft!

While a word, gesture, glance from that same child  
At play or in the school or laid asleep  
Will startle him to an agony of fear,  
Exasperation, just as like.

I have said enough, I think, to make it perfectly clear that Browning's matured theory of knowledge—the theory of knowledge which in spite of its inconsistencies he tenaciously clung to in his later years in preference to the saner intuitive faith of his youth and middle age—was held in subordination to what he considered of vastly more importance—his optimistic theory of the universe. It does not fall within the purpose of this chapter to tell how thoroughgoing, radiant, and stimulating his optimistic theory was, but before I pass from this discussion I must bring into clear relief the principle with which he undergirded his optimism and that he sets over against his skeptical theory of knowledge. That principle, as I have already intimated, is love—for Browning the essence and ultimate principle of all reality. From the beginning of his poetic career to its close he continually unfolds this lofty and impressive teaching. It shines forth in "Pauline" and "Paracelsus," his earliest works; it glows upon every page of his dramas; it finds eloquent utterance in "The Ring and the Book"; it leaps forth into passionate splendor in "Saul" and "Karshish," and burns with mellow but un-



dimmed radiance in "Ferishtah's Fancies" and "Asolando."

As I have said, he sets it over against his faulty theory of knowledge and seeks by the all-conquering power of love to achieve what the intellect alone is unable to accomplish. It is the outgushing of the inner nature of God himself. Its truth and authority and beneficence are immediate, and their validity admits of no question. Love exalts man to immediate vision of God; and to the degree that love is present in the human heart man's nature enters into union with the divine nature. It purifies, quickens, and strengthens the intellect; so that in proportion as love is present knowledge becomes full and unerring. The process whereby Browning deduces this ultimate conception upon which he founds his theory of life is sound and rational. He interprets the universe from an idealistic standpoint, and finds in theistic evolution the law of its development. He posits love as the spiritual activity at the heart of reality, and discovers in it a sufficient explanation for both man and nature. While, of course, not exhaustively scientific in his application of love as the solving principle of all human and cosmic activity, he tests his hypothesis very widely, and makes no vital postulate that must not be made by both science and philosophy. No fruitful progress can

be made by either science or philosophy until some large assumptions have been made. And surely we shall get farther on our way toward a final explanation of the universe if we assume that what has turned out to be highest in the unfolding process whereby the world has gradually been revealing its inner nature was present from the first than we should if we assumed that the highest has evolved from the lowest—spirit from matter, love from blind force. In the succeeding chapters we shall see how successfully Browning applied this ultimate conception of love to all the daily activities of life.

There is no good of life but love—but love!  
What else looks good is some shadow flung from love,  
Love gilds it, gives it worth.



## CHAPTER III

### THE PATH TO GOD

“He there with the brand flamboyant, broad o’er night’s forlorn abyss,  
Crowned by prose and verse; and wielding, with Wit’s bauble, Learning’s rod” . . .  
Well? Why, he at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God!

BROWNING reaches his world of ultimate truth, then, not by intellect, but by intuition. He adds nothing new to our store of knowledge, though he does gain fresh and rich insight into the ultimate realities of life. Throughout the entire range of his poetry the existence of God as the ground and explanation of all being is spontaneously and stoutly assumed. It is not a matter for argument. It is a fact as immediate and indisputable as the existence of his own soul. In his narrative and dramatic poems, such as “Paracelsus,” “Saul,” “Sordello,” “Rabbi Ben Ezra,” “Andrea del Sarto,” “Luria,” “Pippa Passes,” “Abt Vogler,” and a hundred others, his characters accept the existence and authority of God without question or reflection. God is as much a part of their world as the sky under which they were born, or the facts of the world

of common sense through which they take their daily course. It no more occurs to them to question his reality, might, and authority than it does to one of Kipling's Tommy Atkins men to raise questions concerning the existence and authority of her Majesty. Unless it be a Bluphocks, or a Gigadibs, or a Fifine, Browning's characters are, almost without exception, "incurably religious." Some of them, it is true, hold very grotesque and reprehensible theistic views—a Caliban, an Ixion, a Guido, or a Sludge; but with very rare exceptions they are all theologians and each is in his own way attempting to keep on the good side of the being whom he enthrones as his God. In his own person, too, particularly in the reflective and speculative poems in which he grapples with the ultimate problems of thought and reality that assail the minds of all earnest and intelligent men, Browning postulates God as a necessary implication of all that is deepest and most inexplicable in human life. In none of his poems, perhaps, does he more insistently and resolutely set himself to interrogate the grounds of his religious faith than in "La Saisiaz," and here is the statement of his fundamental presupposition:

I have questioned and am answered. Question, answer  
 presuppose  
 Two points: that the thing itself which questions, answers,—  
*is*, it knows;

As it also knows the thing perceived outside itself,—a force Actual ere its own beginning, operative through its course, Unaffected by its end,—that this thing likewise needs must be; Call this—God, then, call that—soul, and both—the only facts for me.

Prove them facts? that they o'erpass my power of proving, proves them such:

Fact it is I know I know not something which is fact as much.

As we examine more closely into this spontaneously derived conception of God—a naked postulate as yet—we find that it unfolds into a luminous and consistent theistic theory of the universe. The God that Browning posits proves to be a spiritual activity—unitary, free, and intelligent—a personal being, therefore. From him all finite existence proceeds and upon him all life depends. Browning is thus seen to be an idealist. The primal essence is not matter but mind. Nor does God make man and nature out of some primitive material that lies conveniently at hand. Both man and nature derive their existence from him, but not by reason of any outward compulsion or any violent rending asunder of his own being. He is absolute and independent, and under no law of necessity. The cosmic world with all its varied and beautiful phenomena is rather an activity of the inner nature of God whereby he expresses his creative rapture; and man likewise he posits in his-own image, impelled by some up-

rushing interest of joy or love in his own being. The creation of the finite world is seen, therefore, to be no limitation of himself. It is a process through which he more completely realizes himself. Nor is his unity destroyed. It is, rather, through his eternally active and unfailing creative power that the universe is held together and given the stamp of reality. The laws of nature are nothing other than expressions of his activity. Its phenomena are activities of God, and a reflection of him, but they are not part and parcel of him; and so man, though he derives his essence from God and is hourly sustained by the immanent presence of God, is yet not God, but himself, with his own pin-point of independent existence. Browning escapes both the dark world of materialism, into which so many of our modern scientists and philosophers have stumbled and lost their way, and the abyss of pantheism, into which philosophical poets like Emerson and poetical philosophers like Schelling have been lured to speculative destruction.

In "Mr. Sludge 'the Medium,'" "A Death in the Desert," and "Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau" he takes delight in girding at the materialistic evolutionist. Speaking of the origin of man, he says:

"Will you have why and wherefore, and the fact  
Made plain as pikestaff?" modern Science asks.

“ That mass man sprung from was a jelly-lump  
 Once on a time; he kept an after-course  
 Through fish and insect, reptile, bird and beast,  
 Till he attained to be an ape at last  
 Or last but one.”

And in another place he says:

Well, sir, the old way's altered somewhat since,  
 And the world wears another aspect now:  
 Somebody turns our spyglass round, or else  
 Puts a new lens in it: grass, worm, fly grow big:  
 We find great things are made of little things,  
 And little things go lessening till at last  
 Comes God behind them. Talk of mountains now?  
 We talk of mold that heaps the mountain, mites  
 That throng the mold, and God that makes the mites.  
 The Name comes close behind a stomach-cyst,  
 The simplest of creations, just a sac  
 That's mouth, heart, legs, and belly at once, yet lives  
 And feels, and could do neither, we conclude,  
 If simplified still further one degree.

After having had his fun at the expense of his scientific brother who holds to his simian ancestry with more gusto than an enlightened poet is wont to do, Browning usually states his own conviction and conclusion in some such lines as these:

This is the glory,—that in all conceived,  
 Or felt or known, I recognize a mind  
 Not mine but like mine,—for the double joy,—  
 Making all things for me and me for Him.

---

He glows above  
 With scarce an intervention, presses close  
 And palpitatingly his soul o'er ours:  
 We feel him, nor by painful reason know!  
 The everlasting minute of creation



Is felt there; now it is as it was then,  
 All changes at his instantaneous will:  
 Not by the operation of a law  
 Whose maker is elsewhere at other work,  
 His hand is still engaged upon his world—  
 Man's praise can forward it, man's prayer suspend,  
 For is not God all-mighty?

In the passage last quoted we have a fine expression of Browning's belief in the immanence of God in the universe. There is, even, a strong Neoplatonic influence present in some of his earliest works that leads to a view of God and the world that verges closely upon pantheism. But in his mature works he repeatedly makes it clear, not only that God is a person—the cause of the world, not its maker—but, also, that man himself, once created, possesses in his own right the qualities of freedom, intelligence, and personality:

I,—not He,—  
 Live, think, do human work here—no machine  
 His will moves, but a being by myself,  
 His, and not He—who made me for a work,  
 — Watches my working, judges its effect,  
 But does not interpose.

We turn now to the three aspects of the divine nature that particularly interested Browning, and that received full treatment and illustration at his hand: intelligence, will, and love.

That the Creator of this orderly universe, who moves forward from generation to generation per-

fectly adapting means to ends, subduing constantly the lower to the higher, and "equalizing, ever and anon, in momentary rapture, great with small," is an intelligent being admits of neither doubt nor discussion in Browning's mind. The same glance that convinces him that "God's in his heaven" convinces him likewise that "from God down to the lowest spirit ministrant intelligence exists." He reads purpose, forethought, and wisdom everywhere. It is true, as I have already shown, that he discredits the efforts of the finite mind to comprehend truth; but he invariably does so that he may the more glorify the immensity and unfathomable wisdom of the divine mind. Man's mind is a spark, but it has for its source the sun; a pinpoint rock, but it has deep-rooted connection with the continent. Browning had little patience with scientific and philosophical theories that seek to explain the universe upon the basis of mechanical laws. He thought it preposterous that men should attribute to blind force or impersonal mechanical law the noble outcome to be found in man's own nature, and in society as he has organized it for his enjoyment and welfare. His only argument against such views was neglect or good-natured scorn. His unvarying assumption is that the foundations of the world are laid in wisdom; that God is the great Geometer; and that all orders of



created life, from the midge up to man, are not only the product of an intelligent being, but are able also, in proportion to their needs and in accordance with the faculty bestowed on each, to appreciate and reflect him:

O, Thou—as represented here to me  
In such conception as my soul allows,—  
Under Thy measureless, my atom width!—  
Man's mind, what is it but a convex glass  
Wherein are gathered all the scattered points  
Picked out of the immensity of sky  
To reunite there, be our heaven for earth,  
Our known unknown, our God revealed to man?  
Existent somewhere, somehow, as a whole;  
Here, as a whole proportioned to our sense,—  
There, (which is nowhere, speech must babble thus!)  
In the absolute immensity, the whole  
Appreciable solely by Thyself,—  
Here, by the little mind of man reduced  
To littleness that suits his faculty,  
In the degree appreciable too;  
Between Thee and ourselves—nay even, again,  
Below us, to the extreme of the minute,  
Appreciable by how many and what diverse  
Modes of the life Thou madest be!

Divine will, or “Power”—to use Browning's favorite term—is as obvious and indisputable in all the ongoings of the universe as divine intelligence. The intuition with which he perceives the existence of God is one and instantaneous with his insight that God is wisdom and power:

Thus much is clear,  
Doubt annulled thus much: I know.

All is effect of Cause:  
As it would, has willed and done  
Power: and my mind's applause  
Goes, passing laws each one,  
To Omnipotence, lord of laws.

“God is the perfect poet, who in his person acts his own creations.” The visible world is the out-rushing of his will; he ordains the seasons; sets the stars in their courses; out of his boundless spiritual energy supplies motives and incentives to man; and momentarily, by the unwearied exercise of his will, sustains the complex and far-reaching processes of intelligence which he has appointed.

Thus far Browning has found the path of theistic faith an easy one to tread. He has reached God at a bound, and has instantaneously interpreted him as a being of limitless intelligence and power. But intelligence and power, he finds, are unable to satisfy the deepest needs of his life. For as he looks about him it is manifest that at every turn of the finite path that leads up to God are the painful evidences of folly, mistake, defeat, and sorrow. Noble and insatiable aspirations for truth and knowledge met by limitations, and disappointment, and mockery on every hand! Splendid attempts upon the part of man to conquer and master the elementary forces about him, and to guide his conduct in accordance with the

wisdom and the power of the universe, issuing everywhere in waste, calamity, and tragedy! What of the dear dead men and women who have loved, and erred, and striven, and fallen; who, pursuing what seemed to them in their folly, or their innocence, or their sinfulness to be the one immediate and certain way to happiness, yet found the road set with thorns, and reached the journey's end only to fall pierced and bleeding upon some sharp and ugly fact that had been hidden from them by reason of their ignorance or their passion? How reconcile the universe as we find it with what we should suppose it would be if God were all-wise and all-powerful? Browning finds his solution for these perplexing problems in that ultimate solving principle at the innermost core of reality of which I spoke in the last chapter—

The love that tops the might, the Christ in God.

He exclaims with Rabbi Ben Ezra,

Praise be thine!  
I see the whole design,  
I, who saw power, see now Love perfect too:  
Perfect I call thy plan:  
Thanks that I was a man!  
Maker, remake, complete,—I trust what thou shalt do!

It is Browning's illuminating insight into this divine principle of love—conceived by him as the back-lying motive of all life and reality—and his

rich illustration of its presence and activity in all the intercourse of man with man and man with God, that gives character and value to his theistic conception. Browning realized that for God to fail us here would be for God to fail us wholly; for the supreme cry of the human heart, beset as it is by its sore doubts, temptations, and sorrows, is not for a God merely, but for a sympathetic God—for a God who feels with us and for us and both understands and bears our infirmities. And, amid all the wealth of religious teaching and the variety of dramatic representations of religious experience that Browning provides for us, nothing is of so much importance to us as the invariable struggle of whatever character he sees fit to depict to reach back, through his erroneous, cloudy, or partial conception of the God of power and intelligence, to find the hand and read the face of a being whose love and compassion should be commensurate with his wisdom and authority. The Greek Ixion, the Arab Karshish, the savage Caliban, the Catholic Guido, the Hebrew David, and the modern English Browning himself—each seeks to find through the shadow, and the thunder, and the earthquake, the God of love and compassion—the God, not of the head, but of the heart.

Condemned to eternal torment, Ixion comes to see that a loveless god is below the respect of man;

and, calmed, enlightened, and purified through his suffering, he spurns the divinity which Zeus arrogates to himself, and catches a vision of a Pure Potency beyond Zeus, in whom reside justice and love. In a similar manner the half-brute Caliban, as he wallows at ease in a shadowed pool on the verge of the sea and communes with himself as to the nature of his god Setebos, while able to read into his nature only power mingled with envy, caprice, and cruelty, perceives a still higher god above—the god of Setebos himself—a being possessed of a quiet and happy life, and actuated by benevolent motives. The alert, inquiring Arab physician, Karshish—a theist but not a Christian—meets Lazarus, and hears the story of how Christ raised him from the dead; and, in spite of his scientific temper and habitual skepticism, returns again and again with fascinated and half-reverent wonder to consider the tale in all its marvelous import; and at last, more than half convinced of its truth, gives voice to the yearnings of his heart, and exclaims:

So the All-Great were the All-Loving too—  
So through the thunder comes a human voice  
Saying, "O heart I made, a heart beats here!  
Face my hands fashioned, see it in myself!  
Thou hast no power nor mayst conceive of mine;  
But love I gave thee, with myself to love,  
And thou must love me who have died for thee!"



The only ray of redemptive hope that strikes through the gloomy murk of hell that has settled over the craven spirit of Guido, the Italian count and priest, comes from his tardy realization of the saintlike purity and sweetness of the young wife whose soul and body he has outraged, and whom he has at last murdered. He has finally been brought to bay. The civil and the ecclesiastical courts have alike decided against him. He has by turns announced himself a primitive religionist, a hypocrite, and an atheist; but when at the end the guard calls to take him to the guillotine—as he seeks in terror and frenzy some last foothold for his soul as it sinks into the bottomless horror of perdition—Browning, in one of the most dramatic and powerful passages in literature, makes him cry out:

“Abate,—Cardinal,—Christ,—Maria,—God, . . .  
Pompilia, will you let them murder me?”

The principle of unfailing goodness and love as incarnated in the girl wife, Pompilia, is the final and redeeming ground of religious hope for this most execrable of all of Browning's depraved characters.

The consummate dramatic representation of a perplexed human heart reaching through the wisdom and power of God to feel if haply it may

apprehend what it counts a higher and supreme need—the love of God manifest in terms of finite comprehension—is the prophetic leap of young David's soul (in his effort to awaken Saul from his settled despair) toward the Christ that was to bless and redeem mankind. With cunning fingers and a skill born of tender solicitude for the great king whom his soul loved he touched his harp to sweet music, hoping thus to win Saul's spirit from its dark wanderings. He sought first, by playing the tune that delights the brute creation, to awaken in the king's breast the elemental emotions that man possesses in common with the animals. Then he played the tunes of domestic joy and sorrow and fellowship; and, anon, since Saul's spirit still hovers on the borderland between hope and despair, his voice accompanies the harp, and he sings the joys of physical manhood and sensuous delight. Next he sings of endeavor, achievement, and renown. But as yet his music has only availed to reawaken Saul to a consciousness of himself and his surroundings, and to elicit evidences of affection and gratitude for David himself—the human friend, the skillful musician. As yet he cares not for life, nor finds sufficient motive to climb again the heights that lead to joy and conquest. So at last David, in the extremity of his human weakness and in the fullness of



his love for Saul and his desire to hearten and reclaim him, yearns:

“Could I help thee, my father, inventing a bliss,  
I would add, to that life of the past, both the future and this;  
I would give thee new life altogether, as good, ages hence,  
As this moment,—had love but the warrant, love’s heart to dispense!”

Then the truth broke into his soul:

“I have gone the whole round of creation: I saw and I spoke:

I, a work of God’s hand for that purpose, received in my brain

And pronounced on the rest of his handwork—returned him again

His creation’s approval or censure: I spoke as I saw:

I report, as a man may of God’s work—all’s love, yet all’s law. . . .

—What, my soul? see thus far and no farther? when doors great and small,

Nine and ninety flew ope at our touch, should the hundredth appall?

In the least things have faith, yet distrust in the greatest of all?

Do I find love so full in my nature, God’s ultimate gift,

That I doubt his own love can compete with it? Here, the parts shift?

Here, the creature surpass the Creator,—the end, what Began?

Would I fain in my impotent yearning do all for this man,

And dare doubt he alone shall not help him, who yet alone can?

Would it ever have entered my mind, the bare will, much less power,

To bestow on this Saul what I sang of, the marvelous dower

Of the life he was gifted and filled with? to make such a soul,  
Such a body, and then such an earth for insphering the  
whole?

And doth it not enter my mind (as my warm tears attest)  
These good things being given, to go on, and give one  
more, the best?

Ay, to save and redeem and restore him, maintain at the  
height

This perfection,—succeed with life's dayspring, death's  
minute of night?

Interpose at the difficult minute, snatch Saul the mistake,  
Saul the failure, the ruin he seems now,—and bid him awake  
From the dream, the probation, the prelude, to find him-  
self set

Clear and safe in new light and new life,—a new harmony  
yet

To be run, and continued, and ended—who knows?—or  
endure!

The man taught enough by life's dream, of the rest to make  
sure;

By the pain-throb, triumphantly winning intensified bliss,  
And the next world's reward and repose, by the struggles  
in this.

"I believe it! 'Tis thou, God, that givest, 'tis I who receive:  
In the first is the last, in thy will is my power to believe.

All's one gift: thou canst grant it moreover, as prompt to  
my prayer

As I breathe out this breath, as I open these arms to the air.  
From thy will stream the worlds, life and nature, thy dread  
Sabaoth:

*I will?*—the mere atoms despise me! Why am I not loth  
To look that, even that in the face too? Why is it I dare  
Think but lightly of such impuissance? What stops my  
despair?

This;—'tis not what man Does which exalts him, but what  
man Would do!

See the King—I would help him but cannot; the wishes  
fall through.

Could I wrestle to raise him from sorrow, grow poor to  
enrich,

To fill up his life, starve my own out, I would—knowing  
which,

I know that my service is perfect. Oh, speak through  
me now!

Would I suffer for him that I love? So wouldst thou—so  
wilt thou!

So shall crown thee the topmost, ineffablest, uttermost  
crown—

And thy love fill infinitude wholly, nor leave up nor down  
One spot for the creature to stand in! It is by no breath,  
Turn of eye, wave of hand, that salvation joins issue with  
death!

As thy Love is discovered almighty, almighty be proved  
Thy power, that exists with and for it, of being Beloved!  
He who did most, shall bear most; the strongest shall stand  
the most weak.

'Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for! my flesh, that  
I seek

In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it shall be  
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,  
Thou shalt love and be loved by, forever: a Hand like this  
hand

Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the  
Christ stand!"

## CHAPTER IV

### THE HUMAN HIGHWAY

Man knows partly but conceives beside,  
Creeps ever on from fancies to the fact,  
And in this striving, this converting air  
Into a solid he may grasp and use,  
Finds progress, man's distinctive mark alone,  
Not God's, and not the beasts': God is, they are,  
Man partly is and wholly hopes to be.

MAN, as we have seen, traces his origin to God and bears his imprint. Man is the creature, God the creator. The mystery of creation Browning does not, of course, attempt to explain. He realizes that it does not fall within the province of finite intelligence to dispart the intricate threads of being that constitute the interrelated life of man and God. But he does trace human existence to its source in the divine life, and does clearly perceive that all finite reality is dependent upon God. He is the cause of all; he momentarily sustains all; all life issues from him; all earthly intelligence centers in him and gains its meaning from him; all righteousness, all love, is from him. There is, too, unquestionable community of life and interest between him and his

human creature. Yet, to a degree, man enjoys a separate and independent existence. He is not coerced in his actions. He is himself a responsible being, endowed with power of initiative, and possessed in his own right of a nature capable of love, and knowledge, and volition. In the long run he must answer to God for the use of his gifts; but he may contravene the will of God—may either grieve or glorify his creator:

You know what I mean: God's all, man's naught.  
But also, God, whose pleasure brought  
Man into being, stands away  
As it were, a handbreadth off,  
To give room for the newly-made to live,  
And look at him from a place apart,  
And use his gifts of brain and heart  
Given, indeed, but to keep forever.  
Who speaks of man, then, must not sever  
Man's very elements from man,  
Saying, "But all is God's"—whose plan  
Was to create and then leave him  
Able, his own word saith, to grieve him,  
But able to glorify him too,  
As a mere machine could never do,  
That prayed or praised, all unaware  
Of its fitness for aught but praise and prayer,  
Made perfect as a thing of course.  
Man, therefore, stands on his own stock  
Of love and power as a pin-point rock:  
And, looking to God, who ordained divorce  
Of the rock from his boundless continent,  
Sees in his power made evident  
Only excess by a millionfold  
O'er the power God gave man in the mold.

The beginnings of man's nature on the material side Browning traces to cosmic sources. He does not thus make man's physical nature any less the product of divine creation, for, as has already been pointed out, nature, as well as man, proceeds from God. His belief is, simply, that man has reached his present stage of existence through a long course of development, and that he has left his imprint upon lower stages of life, just as they, upon their part, foreshadowed in varying degree his coming. The earlier creative processes were cosmic. But as the world took its upward course through shell and leaf and star, through worm and bird and fish and beast, there were constant prophecies and foreshadowings of man. All pointed toward his coming. Had he not later arrived to crown the creative process, much that had preceded him must have seemed fragmentary, incomplete, and inexplicable. But now, as we spell the record backward, we are able to see plainly how

all lead up to higher,  
All shape out dimly the superior race,  
The heir of hopes too fair to turn out false,  
And man appears at last.

---

God takes time.  
I like the thought he should have lodged me once  
I' the hole, the cave, the hut, the tenement,  
The mansion and the palace; made me learn



The feel o' the first, before I found myself,  
Loftier i' the last, not more emancipate;  
From first to last of lodging I was I,  
And not at all the place which harbored me.  
Do I refuse to follow farther yet  
I' the backwardness, repine if tree and flower,  
Mountain or streamlet were my dwelling-place  
Before I gained enlargement, grew mollusk?  
As well account that way for many a thrill  
Of kinship I confess to with the powers  
Called Nature: animate, inanimate,  
In parts or in the whole, there's something there  
Manlike that somehow meets the man in me.

The fact is, man is still in the making. He has attained, as yet, only the first stage of manhood, and he is still mounting his endless way back to God. He is coming to know; he is gaining in power; he is growing in love; but his path to perfection winds in and out round many a mountain height as yet unseen, and he has far to go. But it is just his imperfection that makes him man; discriminating him, as it does, from God, upon the one hand, and from unconscious life upon the other. And it may be well at this point to remind the reader that we now find ourselves upon distinctively Browning territory. We have reached humanity's battleground; and as we survey it we find Browning there, far over upon the verge of the enemy's country, dauntlessly setting the slug-horn to his lips and blowing full in the face of the foe the blast of challenge, of courage, and of con-

quest. He was the supreme poet militant of the moral life. He interprets human life in terms of conflict and struggle. And the conflict is a very real one—the issue very distinctly joined. Upon the one hand, man finds within himself an irrepressible instinct and desire to achieve absolute perfection. There arises, from within himself, an ideal of conduct and attainment which he objectifies, and pursues as the most real and authoritative interest of life. This criterion of excellence he discovers to be the life of God in the soul—laying upon man the requirement to seek and to achieve the highest. But, on the other hand, he finds limitations laid upon him by his very nature as man that render it impossible for him to attain his ideal or to bring to completion the imperative behests of his higher nature. He is thus doomed to perpetual failure, defeat, and disappointment; forever driven to seek perfection by the workings of God's Spirit within him, yet forever drawn earthward and baffled by the restrictions laid upon him by virtue of his finite nature. He thus finds himself in the condition which Paul so graphically depicts in the seventh chapter of his Epistle to the Romans: "I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members,

warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin."

To most of us the condition of man as thus depicted would seem to be the most unhappy one that could be conceived. Why not yield the battle at once? we would ask. Is it worth while to continue such a hopeless struggle? Would it not be better to define the limits within which we find ourselves able to work successfully, and within those limits make such conquests as are within our power? But to Browning such a course would have seemed weak, cowardly, and destructive. Such a course would be to sink into what was for him the deepest and darkest hell of which he was able to conceive. Half-hearted endeavor, compromise, surcease of effort—these, and these alone, of all the possible alternatives that are open to a human being—are deserving of scorn and reprehension. His answer to such a suggestion is to be found in his arraignment of the Lost Leader:

Blot out his name, then, record one lost soul more,  
One task more declined, one more footpath untrod,  
One more devils'-triumph and sorrow for angels,  
One wrong more to man, one more insult to God!

## No, Browning was

One who never turned his back but marched breast forward,  
Never doubted clouds would break,  
Never dreamed, though right were worsted, wrong would  
triumph,  
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,  
Sleep to wake.

Indeed, he would say it is just here, upon this narrow ledge of human opportunity, with the finite abyss of folly, misery, and failure below, and the apparently inaccessible cliff of supreme attainment and fullness of joy above, that man is to find his true testing place. Let him fare upward, though he repeatedly slip and fall. So long as he climbs, utter failure is impossible; for "what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence for the fullness of the days?" The pedestrian walks by perpetually catching himself in the act of falling; and in like manner, though in accordance with a higher law of attraction, the spiritual athlete makes his way toward God by perpetually falling with his face toward the goal. And this is the secret of Browning's resiliency of spirit—of his joy in conflict—of his abounding confidence in the ultimate welfare of humanity. For he sees that, while the victory is never completely won, it is always in process of being won. God is in the battle. No blow is without its effect; and it needs only that the earthly soldier grow not weary in well-doing.

Those who persevere may rest securely in the promise that they "shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

Then, welcome each rebuff  
That turns earth's smoothness rough,  
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!  
Be our joys three-parts pain!  
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;  
Learn, nor account the pang; dare, never grudge the throe!

As yet we need barely to suggest the ground of Browning's radiant optimism. We have time and again suggested that he finds in love the explanation of all that is dark and perplexing in life, and we shall have occasion soon to explain this aspect of his philosophy in the light of the same great principle. But for the present we need only emphasize his teaching that a man's earthly career is simply a testing process—a sort of speeding ground for souls—where the spirit militant is to be transformed so that it may run a triumphant course in newer and higher realms of conquest and achievement. This life is preëminently a place of probation and discipline. We fit ourselves here for a life hereafter. Success or failure is not to be judged by the low standards of time and sense.



Not on the vulgar mass  
Called "work," must sentence pass,  
Things done, that took the eye and had the price;  
O'er which, from level stand,  
The low world laid its hand,  
Found straightway to its mind, could value in a trice:

But all, the world's coarse thumb  
And finger failed to plumb,  
So passed in making up the main account:  
All instincts immature,  
All purposes unsure,  
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's  
amount:

Thoughts hardly to be packed  
Into a narrow act,  
Fancies that broke through language and escaped:  
All I could never be,  
All men ignored in me,  
This I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.

Andrea del Sarto, the faultless painter, pathetic-  
ally realizing that his own art was weak because  
he was able to execute all that he conceived,  
cried out:

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,  
Or what's a heaven for?

The heroic old scholar, in "A Grammarian's  
Funeral," felt that he was set here upon earth to  
settle, and settle forever, certain points in Greek  
grammar; and it mattered not to him that, while  
he obscurely labored, youth, fame, and enjoyment  
were slipping through his fingers:



He would not discount life, as fools do here,  
Paid by installment.  
He ventured neck or nothing—heaven's success  
Found, or earth's failure:  
"Wilt thou trust death or not?" He answered, "Yes!  
Hence with life's pale lure!"  
That low man seeks a little thing to do,  
Sees it and does it:  
This high man, with a great thing to pursue,  
Dies ere he knows it.

So insistent is Browning for struggle, effort, growth, that he makes life one huge Olympic game in which spiritual athletes contest for imperishable crowns. To attain is, of course, a supreme joy; yet defeat is no disgrace; and defeat is always an experience that makes for fullness of life, provided the contestant renew the struggle. The only unpardonable thing is to refuse to enter the game at all. The person who strives, and endures boldly unto the end, even though he may have championed the cause of evil, Browning admires and praises. For he believes that, whenever and wherever good and evil are brought into moral conflict, the good will in the final outcome prove victorious, and that the sinner will thus be convinced, taught, and permanently benefited. It would have been still better for him, of course, if he had known the good from the beginning and had allied himself with it; but he is better off as it is than he would have been if he had been quiescent or, desir-

ing to do wrong, had refrained because of cowardice or inertia. So confident is Browning that in the end good will vindicate itself, and rise triumphant from the worst struggle into which it may be compelled to enter, that he is fond of creating a character now and then who dares to try conclusions with righteousness to the very death:

I hear you reproach, "But delay was best,  
For their end was a crime."—Oh, a crime will do  
As well, I reply, to serve for a test,  
As a virtue golden through and through.

. . . . .

And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost  
Is—the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,  
Though the end in sight was a vice, I say.

---

Each lie

Redounded to the praise of man, was victory  
Man's nature had both right to get and might to gain,  
And by no means implied submission to the reign  
Of other quite as real a nature, that saw fit  
To have its way with man, not man his way with it.

We see, then, that Browning's supreme teaching with respect to man is that human life is a testing place for our higher powers; that man finds within him the working of a power that transcends his finite nature—the light of God in the soul—urging him on to the attainment of absolute perfection; that this ideal of perfection, while the most commanding fact of his life, is unattainable in this

world; that, nevertheless, the supreme worth of life for time and eternity lies in the strenuous and courageous pursuit of this ideal of excellence; that the very law of man's being is movement toward this standard of perfection; and that, ever, as we strive for it, we are in a measure attaining it.

Having now made clear Browning's central teaching concerning man, it is our purpose to study the various activities of his nature as they relate themselves to the realms of sense, of intellect, of art, of morals, and of religion; at the conclusion of the chapter bringing into clear view the principle or motive that justifies and glorifies such a militant nature as Browning ascribes to man.

#### THE WORLD OF SENSE

In his relation to the sense world Browning was Christian rather than ascetic. He enjoyed a rich and complete life. He entered into its delights in no half-hearted way. Says Mr. Dowden: "His senses were at once singularly keen and energetic, and singularly capacious of delight. His eyes were active instruments of observation, and at the same time were possessed by a kind of rapture in form—and not least in fantastic form—and a rapture still finer in the opulence and variety of color." He could not have been a great

poet had it been otherwise; for the material of sense impression enters largely into poetry. All the concrete details that enter into the imaginative work of the poet must originally find their way into the mind through the senses; so the true poet must be delicately sensitive to the manifold appeal that comes to him from the world of nature. That Browning was finely trained in this particular we have already shown in the opening chapter. There was in him much of the natural man, and he frankly enjoyed all sweet and harmless experiences of sense. More than most men he entered into the purely physical pleasures of life.

As we should expect, though, of a poet of such marked spirituality and so strong a moral bent, he subordinates the body to the soul. Fleshly enjoyments, though palpable and immediate, are tainted and disappointing; while heavenly joys, though they flit faint and far upon the horizon, like the Northern Lights or the glorious mists that wreath the autumn hills, are satisfying and enduring. For the most part he looks upon flesh as a retarding medium in the discernment of truth, and as more or less of an impediment to spiritual attainment. It not infrequently blinds the mind to its highest interests, and sometimes beguiles the soul into wrong courses. Its function, of

course, is to serve the higher nature. It is the Caliban among the human endowments. It must play the part of the patient drudge, foregoing its own delights in the interest of its bright master.

The body, nevertheless, is not to be despised. It is entitled to its own pleasure, and is much quicker to learn what is for its comfort and welfare than is the soul; for it has brief time to taste the sweets of life. It is short-lived, so must find its gratification at once or not at all. The spirit can postpone its education and satisfaction, for it endures; but the body speaks the familiar language of lyric poets and of youth:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,  
Old Time is still a-flying;  
And this same flower that smiles to-day  
To-morrow will be dying.

The flesh, at any rate, must in no wise be malignèd; for in some mysterious way soul and body are inseparably wedded here on earth; and even in the highest and holiest undertakings of life the body is a necessary and worthy ally of the spirit:

Let us not always say,  
"Spite of this flesh to-day  
I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole!"  
As the bird wings and sings.  
Let us cry, "All good things  
Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps  
soul!"



## THE WORLD OF INTELLECT

The intellect, like the body, requires severe discipline. Indeed, I think in the hierarchy of man's powers Browning would assign it a rank only one degree above sense. It is a good servant but a hard master. The intellectual craving within us is "a mad and thriveless longing." It is like a disease in the blood; the more it is gratified the more it lusts for further gratification. It has a tendency to override all the other interests of man's nature, and unless he reins it in with firm hand it will bear him to his ruin. If indulged, it becomes arrogant and overmastering, destroying at last the finer sensibilities of life. At the close of his career Paracelsus exclaims:

No, no:

Love, hope, fear, faith—these make humanity;  
These are its sign and note and character,  
And these I have lost!

Nevertheless, the intellect, like the body, has its legitimate sphere of action, and in his younger years Browning conceived that sphere to be a noble one. Intellect is a heaven-born endowment. God himself implants within us our restless desire for truth, and it is his energy working within us that impels us to trace out the laws of the world—laws which are nothing other than his organized thought. The world is full of wonder, and we



can never exhaust the resources of the infinite mind nor discover its ultimate mystery. "Keep but ever looking," says Schramm in "Pippa Passes," "whether with the body's eye or the mind's, and you will soon find something to look on! Has a man done wondering at women?—there follow men, dead and alive, to wonder at. Has he done wondering at men?—there's God to wonder at: and the faculty of wonder may be, at the same time, old and tired enough with respect to its first object, and yet young and fresh sufficiently, so far as concerns its novel one." Nor need we go far to seek truth. If a man would find truth, let him look not alone into the face of the heavens and into the depths of the earth, but within his own heart as well; for we should expect that God would leave the deep and indelible print of his own nature in the human soul, if anywhere—man of all created things being nearest of kin to God:

But, friends,  
Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise  
From outward things, whate'er you may believe.  
There is an inmost center in us all  
Where truth abides in fullness; and around,  
Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,  
This perfect, clear perception—which is truth.

A baffling and perverting carnal mesh  
Binds it, and makes all error; and *to know*  
Rather consists in opening out a way

Whence the imprisoned splendor may escape,  
Than in effecting entry for a light  
Supposed to be without.

The mind builds up its world of truth, however,  
by slow degrees. We do not gain all at a leap.  
Knowledge is more than intuition. It is

the slow  
Uncertain fruit of an enhancing toil,  
Strengthened by love.

The growth of the mind is progressive. What seems true to-day, to-morrow, in the light of fuller knowledge, seems a mistake. We must take half truths and temporary truths and make the most of them, until, in the more certain light that comes from growth and experience, we shall be able to rectify and complete our tentative knowledge. We catch at mistake as an intermediary device to swing ourselves up to certain fact. But what we gain we must keep. The most reprehensible thing is to step backward from a higher to a lower grade of intelligence—having once known, to let our truth slip us.

And this progressive element in knowledge should warn us also of the value of the past. No man should seek to build his structure of truth from the foundation up. He should build upon the past, recognizing the value of what has gone before, and thankfully utilizing the accumulated

stores of knowledge brought down to us through the heroic endeavor of the great minds that have preceded us:

Not so, dear child  
Of after-days, wilt thou reject the past,  
Big with deep warnings of the proper tenure  
By which thou hast the earth: for thee the present  
Shall have distinct and trembling beauty, seen  
Beside that past's own shade when, in relief,  
Its brightness shall stand out: nor yet on thee  
Shall burst the future, as successive zones  
Of several wonder open on some spirit  
Flying secure and glad from heaven to heaven:  
But thou shalt painfully attain to joy,  
While hope and fear and love shall keep thee man!

“While hope and fear and love shall keep thee man!” This teaching Browning eloquently reiterates. Knowledge is not to be sought as an end in itself. Such a course must always prove calamitous. Life possesses other and richer interests than the pursuit of knowledge merely for its own sake. It is not fair that even the flesh should be turned into a veritable drudge in the interest of learning. And if Caliban has a right to rebel against Prospero, how much more imagination, our dainty Ariel, and love, our gracious Miranda! No, the standing scandal of human nature is that intellect should imperiously seek its own ends at the expense of all other modest, sweet, and humble interests of life. And, apart from all this, it

is impossible that the intellect itself should thrive in any such high-handed and haughty course. We know only as we live. Knowledge comes with action, with love, with fellowship; and the intellectual gain that is secured apart from the common paths of daily duty and communion is barren and delusive. All knowledge that enriches draws its very substance from the varied and multiplex life about it.

#### THE REALM OF ART

Art is man's effort to realize and fix in sensuous form the loveliness of the universe. To the soul of every artist is granted fresh and glorified vision of the fair and gracious countenance of eternal beauty, and, as best he can, he transcribes for us the treasured revelation. Love is the only true motive of art. Apart from love there can be no stirring, vitalizing, sympathetic art. Whatever its character—love of child, love of country, love of God—the supreme motive must be the desire to confer benefits upon others. All great art is wrought in self-forgetful passion. The artist in union with the divine essence of beauty in the universe and in the abandonment of love for humanity is caught out of himself, and so creates for the joy of his fellow men. The virtue and nobility of his art is determined by the degree to which he

freely and gladly enters into his product for the benefit and joy of others. A self-centered art is impossible. Humanity must evoke every noble strain, and guide every grave or tender touch of brush, or pen, or chisel. And when thus swept by the creative rapture that works not for personal ends, but to the end that the divine nature may be revealed to the delight of all mankind, the artist finds the very material through which he works entering into pliant conspiracy with him to fix his idea in fair and faultless form. Nor will the artist who sees in love the dominant motive of all creative work find any aspect of his theme too mean for his hand, or any life too humble and obscure to drink joy from his art. Says the poet Aprile in "Paracelsus".

For common life, its wants  
And ways, would I set forth in beauteous hues:  
The lowest hind should not possess a hope,  
A fear, but I'd be by him, saying better  
Than he his own heart's language.

But the chief value that comes to us from the pursuit of art is the realization that perfect beauty and complete fruition are unattainable for man. It is the glory of the artist that he is able in moments of insight to transcend his earthly limitations and snatch bright glimpses of the eternal radiance; but it is his wisdom not to rest in any



partial achievement—not to be satisfied with broken fragments caught up from God's rich banquet board. Let the artist never rest in accomplishment. One's art will perish so, his inspiration vanish, and he be left thenceforth unvisited by heavenly gleams:

All partial beauty was a pledge  
Of beauty in its plenitude:  
But since the pledge sufficed thy mood,  
Retain it! plenitude be theirs  
Who looked above!

Art temporarily translates us into the perfect, but not that we may rest there. Rather that, through failure to achieve the whole, the perfect, and the permanent, we may renew our strength for yet other and farther-ranging incursions upon the realm of the absolute—freshened, and cheered, and heartened, to be sure, but never satisfied. It is the realization of this truth that so exalts and comforts the soul of the musician in "Abt Vogler"; the conscious repudiation of it that so depresses the painter in "Andrea del Sarto." The pitiful confession of Andrea del Sarto is:

Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp,  
Or what's a heaven for? All is silver-gray  
Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!

On the other hand, the words of the musician, while full of pathos, are nevertheless vibrant with all high hope and achievement:



Well, it is gone at last, the palace of music I reared;  
 Gone! and the good tears start, the praises that come too  
 slow;  
 For one is assured at first, one scarce can say that he feared,  
 That he even gave it a thought, the gone thing was to go.  
 Never to be again! But many more of the kind  
 As good, nay, better perchance: is this your comfort to me?  
 To me, who must be saved because I cling with my mind  
 To the same, same self, same love, same God: ay, what was,  
 shall be.

Therefore to whom turn I but to thee, the ineffable Name?  
 Builder and maker, thou, of houses not made with hands!  
 What, have fear of change from thee who art ever the same?  
 Doubt that thy power can fill the heart that thy power  
 expands?  
 There shall never be one lost good! What was, shall live as  
 before;  
 The evil is null, is naught, is silence implying sound;  
 What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good  
 more;  
 On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven a perfect round.

It is in keeping with this characteristic teaching  
 of Browning's that he praises the work of the early  
 Italian artists who, after their predecessors had  
 long rested in the classic perfection of form that  
 came through Greek art, at last renounced slavish  
 adherence to fixed models that prohibited all  
 growth in art, and sought by strong but crude  
 and inadequate means to

Make new hopes shine through the flesh they fray,  
 New fears aggrandize the rags and tatters:  
 To bring the invisible full into play!  
 Let the visible go to the dogs—what matters?

Browning was not, after all, one to "let the visible go to the dogs." It was not like him to rest content with any half theory of art or any radically false notion of the comparative merits of content and form—of soul and body. As I have already shown, he valued all human qualities as inherently good. He realized the value to art of all glad, primitive, and spontaneous manifestations of life, whether in nature or man. So we find him, in "Fra Lippo Lippi," saying a good word for close adherence to the physical facts to be reproduced in art, for good technique, and realistic truth to life:

Do you feel thankful, ay or no,  
For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,  
The mountain round it and the sky above,  
Much more the figures of man, woman, child,  
These are the frame to? What's it all about?  
To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,  
Wondered at? oh, this last of course!—you say.  
But why not do as well as say,—paint these  
Just as they are, careless what comes of it?  
God's works—paint any one, and count it crime  
To let a truth slip.

#### THE MORAL WORLD

Browning's predominating interest, though, is man's moral welfare, and the key of this he finds in service. As we tread earth's highway we mingle inextricably with our fellow men. What is our neighbor's interest is our interest. What injures

our neighbor injures us. Our moral nature cannot grow and thrive apart from the joys, and sorrows, and struggles of our fellow men. Human life with all its stress and strife, its weal and woe, is the school in which we are to discipline our souls; and it is our happiness and wisdom to take our part in the daily routine. Browning has much to say about the function of great men in the world; but one thing he always makes very plain: our heroes can never attain greatness apart from their kind. They cannot shower gifts and services upon the multitude unless they themselves come down and dwell familiarly with the world which they would conquer and serve. The poem "Paracelsus" eloquently teaches this. As he is about to take leave of his dear friends, Festus and Michal, to search out all truth, Paracelsus says:

If I can serve mankind  
'Tis well; but there our intercourse must end:  
I never will be served by those I serve.

To this the wiser but less brilliant Festus replies:

Look well to this; here is a plague spot, here,  
Disguise it how you may! . . .  
'Tis but a spot as yet: but it will break  
Into a hideous blotch if overlooked.  
                                . . . Were I elect like you,  
I would encircle me with love, and raise  
A rampart of my fellows; it should seem  
Impossible for me to fail, so watched  
By gentle friends who made my cause their own.

They should ward off fate's envy—the great gift,  
Extravagant when claimed by me alone,  
Being so a gift to them as well as me.  
If danger daunted me or ease seduced,  
How calmly their sad eyes should gaze reproach!

The secret of the expanding moral life, then, lies in service to our kind. And service, the poet has repeatedly shown us, does not rank as great or small. Its virtue lies in doing lovingly and well the deed at hand. It is impossible for us to know what is great and what is small. Pippa and Theocrite wrought not one whit less nobly than Queen and Pope. Browning does not estimate success as most men estimate it. Success does not come chiefly through dollars and cents, or houses and lands, or fame and earthly favor. Defeat in a noble cause outshines the most glorious achievement secured at the expense of honor, or justice, or truth.

It is Browning's distinction, though, that he refines upon the law of service, and finds the secret and motive of all human conduct in the principle of love. To the degree that they are wrought in love men's deeds ring true. Love is pure and self-forgetful. It counts not its own life dear unto itself, but pours it out upon the object of its affection without stint or measure. Love brightens and redeems every path the human foot may tread, however sordid, thorny, or polluted. No being

who cherishes in his breast the slightest spark of this unselfish and uncalculating love can prove utterly worthless. So long as love persists in the soul, hope and faith and God persist there. Indeed, Browning holds that man's temporary life in the flesh was ordained for no other purpose than to teach him the lesson of love:

For life, with all it yields of joy and woe,  
And hope and fear,—believe the aged friend,—  
Is just our chance o' the prize of learning love.

Let Browning launch his craft where he may, sooner or later it finds its way to this measureless ocean of love. Whether his bark be a fairy pinnace with fluttering pennant and silken sails launched upon some quiet rivulet and freighted with fabrics woven in the loom of fancy, or whether it be the grim warship, swinging loose from its moorings in the broad, friendly, placid river, with its sullen towers, and guns, and turrets, and death-dealing cargo of shot and shell, forged in the furnace of passion, it is all one. It matters not whether we call the craft "Summum Bonum" or "The Ring and the Book"; "My Star" or "Sordello"; "Ferishtah's Fancies" or "Fifine at the Fair"—they are destined for the same open sea—the keel of each is at last to feel the waters of the shoreless ocean of love.

In the first part of "Pippa Passes" he shows how



even the tainted love of a guilty and voluptuous woman may, under the influence of a sudden and consuming flame of self-abnegation, instantaneously be transmuted into worth and redeeming beauty. In "Cristina" he suggests how a man and a woman, reading intuitively at first sight that their two souls had been wedded in love from eternity, may tread divergent paths—the woman downward, the man upward. For the woman, through pride of birth and haughtiness of spirit, spurns the preordained alliance; while the man takes into his great soul the instantaneous assurance that this insight is the sanctifying experience of his life:

She has lost me, I have gained her;  
Her soul's mine: and thus, grown perfect,  
I shall pass my life's remainder.  
Life will just hold out the proving  
Both our powers, alone and blended:  
And then, come the next life quickly!  
This world's use will have been ended.

In "Confessions" a dying man recalls with consolation the sweet, mad, illicit love of his youth. He has cherished the memory of this clandestine love all his days, and now he views it with no regret; but, rejecting the minister's words of religious admonition, he turns to it as the sole influence that can brighten his dying pillow. In "Youth and Art" we have the story of high worldly success secured



at the cost of murdered love and consequent spiritual atrophy:

Each life's unfulfilled, you see;  
It hangs still, patchy and scrappy:  
We have not sighed deep, laughed free,  
Starved, feasted, despaired,—been happy.

And nobody calls you a dunce,  
And people suppose me clever:  
This could but have happened once,  
And we missed it, lost it forever.

In "The Ring and the Book" Caponsacchi—a brilliant, handsome, ardent young monk—under a misguided sense of the sacredness and seriousness of his holy office, falls into the sensuous and frivolous life common to his class; but, suddenly, through his high, pure, and romantic passion for Pompilia undergoing transformation into a warrior-saint, becomes a veritable sword of consuming flame wielded by God's own right arm:

Sirs, I obeyed. Obedience was too strange,—  
This new thing that had been struck into me  
By the look o' the lady,—to dare disobey  
The first authoritative word. 'Twas God's.  
I had been lifted to the level of her,  
Could take such sounds into my sense. I said,  
"We two are cognizant o' the Master now;  
She it is bids me bow the head: how true,  
I am a priest! I see the function here;  
I thought the other way self-sacrifice:  
This is the true, seals up the perfect sum."

Thus it is that Browning makes love the touchstone for all the experiences of life. He traces its effects through good report and evil report, through success and failure, through youth and old age. He depicts the love of man for man, of man for maid, and of patriot for fatherland—embroidering his theme with endless subtlety, variety, and beauty, but always laying stress upon love as a supreme moral test.

#### THE RELIGIOUS WORLD

The passage from the realm of morals into the realm of religion is but a step; for the energy that we have found so persistent in the soul of man, urging him to purity, and service, and perfect love, is the same energy which, outside and above the soul of man, we name God. It is possible for the spirit of man and the Spirit of God to be perfectly united in purpose and communion. And the common ground where the activities of God and man become one is the motive of perfect love; for in the last resolve love is the essence of God's nature. When he thinks, love is his thought; when he wills, love is the product of his will. To the degree, therefore, that man thinks and wills the good—to the degree that he realizes love in his finite dealings—he interfuses himself with God; and in the process man not only attains his

own highest perfection and joy, but God, too, attains the ultimate goal of his endeavor. In so far as he loves, then, man is one with God. And to the degree that he loves he is religious. So it is apparent that there is no wide gulf between morality and religion. A man may lay hold of the merest shred of the measureless love of God, but to the extent that he comes into even this fragmentary relation with this perfect love he is religious. Sometimes, by faith, or insight, or the purifying power of a great passion that takes him completely out of himself, man finds himself in absolute accord with God, and there results a sense of satisfaction, of surcease, of rapturous quiescence. Such experiences come to the best of men but rarely. As for earthly loves, they are only foregleams of the perfect love with which God would bless us. The issue of the purest human love must needs be

Infinite passion, and the pain  
Of finite hearts that yearn.

We have found at last, then, the explanation of Browning's optimistic faith that man is in a good way and that all must be well at last. The ultimate fact of the universe is love; and its sway is all-comprehensive, and absolutely certain of final victory. Pope's assertion that

Man never is, but always to be blessed,

is but a shallow truth. Browning would say man ever is and always shall be blessed; for he loves, and love is an onward current that never ebbs; and borne upon this current humanity will at last make its far, fair haven; and meanwhile, as it voyages, it will find the course not too rough, but glorified by frequent halcyon days and calm nights set with stars.

## CHAPTER V

### THE UPWARD MARCH OF NATURE

He dwells in all,  
From life's minute beginnings, up at last  
To man.

THIS chapter deals not so much with Browning's artistic treatment of nature as with his philosophical interpretation of nature. It would be a fascinating task to show the various ways in which he subdues nature to poetic ends, for it occupies an important place in his poetry. For example, we might study the precision and accuracy with which he depicts form in nature; or revel in his richness, variety, and splendor of color; or marvel at the manner in which—drenching his mind with the inner meaning of some potent aspect or mood of nature—he flashes forth its full significance in a magic word or flaming line; or admire the art with which, upon rare occasions, he brings nature into friendly or harmonious relations with some high or ecstatic mood of man; or ponder with subdued enjoyment his masterful delineation of the vast elemental forces of nature as they pursue their own mysteries or impressive ends in utter aloofness from

men and in apparent disregard of their transient and petty affairs. But we must forego these pleasures in order that we may continue the connected study of his system of thought.

Nature in one form or another has been an important element in the work of all great poets. God, man, nature—these are the interests that enter into the warp and woof of all true poetry. Usually all three of these interests enter into a notable and enduring poem; though usually a single interest predominates in any particular production. Our modern English poets—especially since the time of Wordsworth and Coleridge—have entered into very intimate relations with nature, and most of those who have achieved lasting distinction have held somewhat definite reflective views of the origin, function, and significance of nature. Coleridge teaches that nature derives its meaning from the human mind; that whatever light, or wisdom, or glory nature possesses is read into it by the spirit of man:

O Lady! we receive but what we give,  
 And in our life alone does Nature live:  
 Ours is her wedding-garment, ours her shroud!  
 And would we aught behold, of higher worth,  
 Than that inanimate cold world allowed  
 To the poor, loveless, ever-anxious crowd,  
 Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth  
 A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud  
 Enveloping the earth.



Wordsworth does not accept such a view of nature—though, for the most part, there was close kinship of thought between these two poets. But Wordsworth emphasized preëminently the spiritual function of nature; holding that nature is alive; that it is dominated by a unitary spirit; that it is all but conscious; that it is the direct word of God; that it sustains an intimate kinship with man; and that it conveys fresh and thrilling messages of love and joy and tranquillity to the soul of man. Byron had, perhaps, no very clearly defined philosophical conception of nature, but he sets it in sharp contrast over against humanity, and at times seeks relief in its moods of calm, or power, from poisonous and feverish intercourse with humanity. He found most satisfaction in its massive, elemental, and turbulent aspects. Shelley endows certain primitive manifestations of nature with a life wholly apart from that of man, and then, by an exquisite poetic gift, identifies himself imaginatively with the ancient, remote, and alien creature, and causes it to utter its plaint or its chant for the delectation of man. Emerson saw in nature a divine dream—a faint incarnation of God. Its function, he believes, is to suggest the Absolute to man, and to teach him the lesson of worship. As it is inviolable, and untainted by the human will, it is a fixed point whereby we may measure

the extent of our departure from God. Tennyson depicts nature in all lovely forms and colors, but he does not abandon himself to joyous communion with it. He does not conceive of it as alive, and as going forth in vital sympathy toward man, as do most of the other poets I have mentioned. To him the most impressive thing in nature is its orderly procedure—its undeviating submission to law. His interest is almost wholly scientific and intellectual, as is well illustrated by the most quoted of all his poems of philosophical import:

Flower in the crannied wall,  
 I pluck you out of the crannies,  
 I hold you here, root and all, in my hand,  
 Little flower—but *if* I could understand  
 What you are, root and all, and all in all,  
 I should know what God and man is.

Browning has his own definite theory of nature, no less original than those to which I have referred though naturally in many respects in close accord with one or the other of them. Nature, like man, is the outpouring of God's creative joy. He enters with rapture into the creative process. And nature shares in this divine joy. All grades of being—in proportion to their capacity—rejoice in the degree of life that has been accorded them:

I knew, I felt (perception unexpressed,  
 Uncomprehended by our narrow thought,  
 But somehow felt and known in every shift  
 And change in the spirit,—nay, in every pore

Of the body, even)—what God is, what we are,  
What life is—how God tastes an infinite joy  
In infinite ways—one everlasting bliss,  
From whom all being emanates, all power  
Proceeds; in whom is life for evermore,  
Yet whom existence in its lowest form  
Includes; where dwells enjoyment there is he:  
With still a flying point of bliss remote,  
A happiness in store afar, a sphere  
Of distant glory in full view; thus climbs  
Pleasure its heights forever and forever.  
The center-fire heaves underneath the earth,  
And the earth changes like a human face;  
The molten ore bursts up among the rocks,  
Winds into the stone's heart, outbranches bright  
In hidden mines, spots barren river beds,  
Crumbles into fine sand where sunbeams bask—  
God joys therein. The wroth sea's waves are edged  
With foam, white as the bitten lip of hate,  
When, in the solitary waste, strange groups  
Of young volcanoes come up, cyclops-like,  
Staring together with their eyes on flame—  
God tastes a pleasure in their uncouth pride.  
Then all is still; earth is a wintry clod:  
But spring-wind, like a dancing psaltress, passes  
Over its breast to waken it, rare verdure  
Buds tenderly upon rough banks, between  
The withered tree-roots and the cracks of frost,  
Like a smile striving with a wrinkled face;  
The grass grows bright, the boughs are swoln with blooms  
Like chrysalids impatient for the air,  
The shining dorrs are busy, beetles run  
Along the furrows, ants make their ado;  
Above, birds fly in merry flocks, the lark  
Soars up and up, shivering for very joy;  
Afar the ocean sleeps; white fishing-gulls  
Flit where the strand is purple with its tribe  
Of nested limpets; savage creatures seek  
Their loves in wood and plain—and God renews  
His ancient rapture.

All forms of life up to man are perfectly adapted by nature for the environment and pursuits for which they were created, and each creature takes pleasure in the exercise of its functions. There has been no failure in adapting means to ends; no instinct or tendency has been implanted in any natural form without its accompanying means of fulfillment. It is only with the arrival of man—that is, with the introduction of moral life into the scheme—that apparent failure begins; for “a man can use but a man’s joy while he sees God’s.”

If, in the morning of philosophy,  
 Ere aught had been recorded, nay, perceived,  
 Thou, with the light now in thee, couldst have looked  
 On all earth’s tenantry, from worm to bird,  
 Ere man, her last, appeared upon the stage—  
 Thou wouldst have seen them perfect, and deduced  
 The perfectness of others yet unseen.

All’s perfect else: the shell sucks fast the rock,  
 The fish strikes through the sea, the snake both swims  
 And slides, forth range the beasts, the birds take flight,  
 Till life’s mechanics can no farther go—  
 And all this joy in natural life is put  
 Like fire from off thy finger into each,  
 So exquisitely perfect is the same.

Nor does Browning even here lose sight of love, the underlying, always present, motive of his work. Even nature, acknowledging the sway of this all-conquering energy in the universe, dimly gropes toward the perfect day when love shall be enthroned over all. God teaches “what love can do in the

leaf or stone"; "the loving worm within its clod" responds to the love of the sun and of the dew; and the dumb brute, through some deep-seated instinct of love, protects its offspring at the cost of its own life. David, the musician, as he went home through the night, after his prophetic announcement to Saul that God's love is to be revealed to man through the incarnation of Christ, found the whole earth awakened; "the stars of night beat with emotion, and tingled and shot out in fire the strong pain of pent knowledge." The whole universe pulsed in sympathy with the message of love which he had divined:

E'en the serpent that slid away silent—he felt the new law.  
The same stared in the white humid faces upturned by the  
    flowers;  
The same worked in the heart of the cedar and moved the  
    vine-bowers:  
And the little brooks witnessing murmured, persistent and  
    low,  
With their obstinate, all but hushed voices—"E'en so,  
    it is so."

Browning endows nature with a distinct life of its own, and sees in it the creative presence of God, but he finds little vital intercourse between nature and man. Nature pursues its own mysterious ends without particular reference to man or his interests. Nature is vastly older than man, and she endures unchanged while individual man



decays. Nature and God dwelt together in joyful activity centuries before man made his appearance; and, while man's physical nature found its way up to perfection by the cosmic route, along with all other material forms, he was assigned, with the dawn of his moral nature, a divergent path of development which has led him into new and higher realms of activity. Nature is neither the creation of man's mind, as Coleridge would teach, nor is it within the power of nature to enter into conscious spiritual communion with man, and thus convey to him lessons of wisdom, comfort, and strength, as Wordsworth believed. In rare instances nature and man find themselves in moods that are congenial and responsive, and upon such occasions nature may weave a magic spell to beguile man, or to heighten or precipitate his human emotions; but quite as often she mocks, eludes, or disregards him, and busies herself with her own alien and elemental affairs. For the most part, so far as any vital kinship of interest and communion is concerned, nature goes one way and man another.

But, though endowed with neither the gift nor the desire to share man's moral life and enter into spiritual intercourse with him, she is set to instruct him and to point him back of herself to God her creator. He may see in her life God's loving pur-



pose in all that his power has wrought, and through her, also, may be brought face to face with God's infinitude. The wise heart will "look through Nature up to Nature's God." It will rejoice in this earth as an incomparable palace of beauty fitted up for its probationary stage; but it will not attempt to satisfy itself with this one rose flung freely "out of a summer's opulence." In this token it will read, rather, the desire of God to woo us to the paradise in which it grew.

"Miser, there waits the gold for thee!  
 Hater, indulge thine enmity!  
 And thou, whose heaven self-ordained  
 Was, to enjoy earth unrestrained,  
 Do it! Take all the ancient show!  
 The woods shall wave, the rivers flow."

I stooped and picked a leaf of fern,  
 And recollected I might learn  
 From books, how many myriad sorts  
 Of fern exist, to trust reports,  
 Each as distinct and beautiful  
 As this, the very first I cull.  
 Think, from the first leaf to the last!  
 Conceive, then, earth's resources! Vast  
 Exhaustless beauty, endless change  
 Of wonder! And this foot shall range  
 Alps, Andes,—and this eye devour  
 The bee-bird and the aloe-flower?

"Does it confound thee,—this first page  
 Emblazoning man's heritage?—  
 Can this alone absorb thy sight,  
 As pages were not infinite,—

Like the omnipotence which tasks  
 Itself to furnish all that asks  
 The soul it means to satiate?  
 What was the world, the starry state  
 Of the broad skies,—what, all displays  
 Of power and beauty intermixed,  
 Which now thy soul is chained betwixt,—  
 What else than needful furniture  
 For life's first stage? God's work, be sure,  
 No more spreads wasted than falls scant!  
 He filled, did not exceed, man's want  
 Of beauty in this life. But through  
 Life pierce,—and what has earth to do,  
 Its utmost beauty's appanage,  
 With the requirement of next stage?"

“So, in God's eye, the earth's first stuff  
 Was, neither more nor less, enough  
 To house man's soul, man's need fulfill.  
 Man reckoned it immeasurable?"

“All partial beauty was a pledge  
 Of beauty in its plenitude:  
 But since the pledge sufficed thy mood,  
 Retain it! plenitude be theirs  
 Who looked above!"

In one other way, also, relationship is suggested between nature and man, a relationship which, however, has less significance for nature than for man. I refer to Browning's retrospective enjoyment of nature's progressive attempts to consummate its development, and to fulfill hints that it had continually sent before, by at last shaping out the superior race—humanity itself. As man, standing now at the apex of creation, looks back

over the long, slow process by which he reached his present stage of life, he imprints his own rich and complex nature upon all these fragmentary beginnings of life, and casts upon them all "a supplementary reflux of light" that

Illustrates all the inferior grades, explains  
Each back step in the circle.

Man, once descried, imprints forever  
His presence on all lifeless things: the winds  
Are henceforth voices, wailing or a shout,  
A querulous mutter or a quick gay laugh,  
Never a senseless gust now man is born.  
The herded pines commune and have deep thoughts,  
A secret they assemble to discuss  
When the sun drops behind their trunks which glare  
Like grates of hell: the peerless cup afloat  
Of the lake-lily is an urn, some nymph  
Swims bearing high above her head: no bird  
Whistles unseen, but through the gaps above  
That let light in upon the gloomy woods,  
A shape peeps from the breezy forest-top,  
Arch with small puckered mouth and mocking eye.  
The morn has enterprise, deep quiet droops  
With evening, triumph takes the sunset hour,  
Voluptuous transport ripens with the corn  
Beneath a warm moon like a happy face:  
—And this to fill us with regard for man.

## CHAPTER VI

### GOD'S MESSAGE TO MAN

I say, the acknowledgment of God in Christ,  
Accepted by the reason, solves for thee  
All questions in the earth and out of it,  
And has so far advanced thee to be wise.

OF all modern English poets Browning seems to me to be the most distinctively Christian. I do not mean by this that his own life radiated the life of Christ any more perfectly than did the lives of his fellow poets of that generation, or that he any more than they took up the cudgels in dogmatic defense of his faith. He was not a saint when he was at his best; nor, on the other hand, when he was at his worst was he a dogmatist. In nearly all of his poems that have to do distinctively with Christianity the artist transcends the polemic. What I mean is that, by inheritance and habits and the higher necessities of his nature, he was from boyhood to old age a Christian in every vital sense of that word.

Both the dogmatist and the so-called liberalist have attempted to appropriate him; but neither the one nor the other—if loyal to the full import of his teaching—has been able to do so with com-

plete satisfaction. He has left spoken and written words on record outside of his poetry which, unless interpreted in the light of his entire life and complete utterances, whether public or private, seem contradictory. One author, Robert Buchanan, says that when he asked Browning upon one occasion whether he were a Christian, Browning "thundered, 'No!'" Moncure Conway records that, "Browning's 'orthodoxy' brought him into many a combat with his rationalistic friends, some of whom could hardly believe that he took his doctrine seriously. . . . To one who had spoken of an expected 'Judgment Day' as a superstition I heard him say: 'I don't see that. Why should there not be a settling day in the universe, as when a master settles with his workmen at the end of the week?'" Mrs. Orr, one of his most authoritative biographers, in one place quotes Browning's own words as follows (a reiteration of those of Napoleon): "I am an understander of men, and He was no man." Yet she also states upon the opposite page that the poem "La Saisiaz" "is conclusive both in form and matter as to his heterodox attitude toward Christianity." Mr. Edward Dowden, his latest and most scholarly biographer, seems to me to place the matter in its true light when he says, in commenting upon "Christmas Eve":

The central idea of the whole is that where love is there is Christ; and the Christ of the poem is certainly no abstraction, no moral ideal, no transcendental conception of absolute charity, but very God and very Man, the Christ of Nazareth, who dwelt among men, full of grace and truth. Literary criticism which would interpret Browning's meaning in any other sense may be ingenious, but it is not disinterested, and some side-wind blows it far from the mark.

My own study renders it clear to me that Browning was through and through a Christian; but that, constitutionally, and in keeping with his whole theory of life, he laid less stress upon intellectual assurance or finality in his Christian faith than he did upon spiritual acceptance of Christianity by the whole man, through an intuitive vision of Christ's worth, and the consequent loyalty to his teachings in the practical conduct of daily life. How anyone can carefully read with an open and candid mind all that Browning has said and written concerning the Christian revelation, and then affirm that he was not a Christian in every legitimate sense of that word, is more than I can understand.

The candid incline to surmise of late  
That the Christian faith proves false, I find;

I still, to suppose it true, for my part,  
See reasons and reasons; this, to begin:  
'Tis the faith that launched point-blank her dart  
At the head of a lie—taught Original Sin,  
The Corruption of Man's Heart.



And I, for my part, can find no other explanation for the attempt of both orthodox and heterodox readers of Browning to twist the poet's utterances to their own respective ways of thinking than that suggested here in Browning's own lines—

Original Sin,  
The Corruption of Man's Heart.

, To complete his general theory of the universe it was necessary that Browning should find a place for some such revelation of God as we have in the Incarnate Christ. God had amply attested his intelligence; the evidences of his power, too, writ large and clear in all natural phenomena, could no more be mistaken than the handwriting on the wall of Belshazzar's palace. But his goodness showed itself but dimly in the machinelike precision of material laws; in the dread power that worked man's interest sometimes, but that very often, also, worked his destruction; and in the tangled web of pain and joy that man was ever weaving for himself. The poor half-savage Caliban conceived of a god who gave evidence of no higher motive for the guidance and control of his creatures than cruelty and caprice; and it cannot be denied that some not altogether humanized scientists and philosophers of the nineteenth century found such a conception of God adequate to

their needs. But the typical human heart cannot endure the idea of a God indifferent to the weal or woe of his creatures. Not even the stout heart of Browning could have clung to an optimistic faith unsupported by some token that God cares for his children. The good Pope, in "The Ring and the Book," sums up the issue well as he communes with himself concerning the nature of God and the truth of Christianity:

Conjecture of the worker by the work:  
Is there strength there?—enough: intelligence?  
Ample: but goodness in a like degree?  
Not to the human eye in the present state,  
An isoscele deficient in the base.  
What lacks, then, of perfection fit for God  
But just the instance which this tale supplies  
Of love without a limit? So is strength,  
So is intelligence; let love be so,  
Unlimited in its self-sacrifice,  
Then is the tale true and God shows complete.  
Beyond the tale, I reach into the dark,  
Feel what I cannot see, and still faith stands:  
I can believe this dread machinery  
Of sin and sorrow would confound me else,  
Devised—all pain, at most expenditure  
Of pain by Who devised pain—to evolve,  
By new machinery in counterpart,  
The moral qualities of man—how else?—  
To make him love in turn and be beloved,  
Creative and self-sacrificing too,  
And thus eventually Godlike.

There is another reason, also, why to Browning's mind an incarnation of divine love in human form

was requisite. Grant that man might have inferred from the love that he found in his own soul, as, in the poem "Saul," Browning represents David to have done, the assurance that God's purposes toward men were benevolent, still how vague, remote, and wistful must have been his conception of God's good intentions! In "An Epistle to Karshish" and in "Cleon" Browning gives us a dramatic illustration of this very need. Both Karshish and Cleon are religious; and both, while recognizing the power and intelligence of their respective gods, yearn for a solution of human pain, futility, and limitation—both yearn for a revelation of love. But with fine dramatic effect Browning betrays each of them into the unconscious irony of rejecting the story of Christ's incarnation as a tale unworthy of serious consideration. It was necessary that God's love should find concrete embodiment among men, so that in our own human way we might clasp his hand, and hear his voice, and commune with him, and see in the sufferings to which he condescended in the flesh that the pain which had been set as a necessary part of our discipline was not visited upon us without cost of pain to him also; but that, on the contrary, the moral outcome was so worthy and so desirable that he himself was willing to share our sorrow with us, and endure all that humanity must needs undergo,

to the end that we might at last become Godlike ourselves. Thus it is that God acquaints us with himself, and at the same time supplies us with a powerful motive to heroic conduct. For, too frequently, it is not knowledge that we lack so much as will; and the earthly presence of God in our midst wonderfully avails to reinforce our faltering purpose and supply us with incentives fresh from God.

- 'Tis one thing to know, and another to practice.  
And thence I conclude that the real God-function  
Is to furnish a motive and injunction  
For practicing what we know already.  
And such an injunction and such a motive  
As the God in Christ, do you waive, and "heady,  
High-minded," hang your tablet-votive  
Outside the fane on a finger-post?  
Morality to the uttermost,  
Supreme in Christ as we all confess,  
Why need we prove would avail no jot  
To make him God, if God he were not?  
What is the point where himself lays stress?  
Does the precept run, "Believe in good,  
In justice, truth, now understood  
For the first time"?—or, "Believe in me,  
Who lived and died, yet essentially  
Am Lord of Life"? Whoever can take  
The same to his heart and for mere love's sake  
Conceive of the love,—that man obtains  
A new truth; no conviction gains  
Of an old one only, made intense  
By a fresh appeal to his faded sense.

But in affirming that the incarnation was vital to Browning's theory of life I have stated only

one side of the truth; for it has become plain to us long before this that no smooth path to faith or fruition ever met with Browning's approval. He would have placed little value upon the truth that could be taken up at once and completely by man's mind. A truth that admitted of such mastery by a finite mind must, in the very nature of the case, be a limited truth and, therefore, unadapted to the progressive needs of humanity. This explains why he prized

the doubt

Low kinds exist without,

and so often lays stress upon the value of a militant faith:

With me, faith means perpetual unbelief  
Kept quiet like the snake 'neath Michael's foot,  
Who stands calm just because he feels it writhe.

These last lines came from the lips of the famous Bishop Blougram—one of Browning's worldly ecclesiastics. For fear that this may be too strong a putting of Browning's own point of view, I quote the words of the sublime old Pope in "The Ring and the Book" concerning his intellectual attitude toward Christianity. He has just been saying that he cares not whether the Christian revelation be revealed as an absolute, abstract, independent historic truth, or only as truth reduced to man's power of comprehension and adapted to his limited mind, and he concludes his meditation as follows:



What matter so intelligence be filled?  
 To a child, the sea is angry, for it roars:  
 Frost bites, else why the toothlike fret on face?  
 Man makes acoustics deal with the sea's wrath,  
 Explains the choppy cheek by chymic law,—  
 To man and child remains the same effect  
 On drum of ear and root of nose, change cause  
 Never so thoroughly: so my heart be struck,  
 What care I,—by God's gloved hand or the bare?  
 Nor do I much perplex me with aught hard,  
 Dubious in the transmitting of the tale,—  
 No, nor with certain riddles set to solve.  
 This life is training and a passage; pass,—  
 Still, we march over some flat obstacle  
 We made give way before us; solid truth  
 In front of it, what motion for the world?  
 The moral sense grows but by exercise.

Having explained Browning's general attitude toward Christianity, let us consider certain details of Christian belief upon which he laid stress.

#### THE NATURE OF CHRIST

We shall find the best statement of Browning's belief that Jesus was very God, present for a time among men, in "Christmas Eve" and in "A Death in the Desert." In "Christmas Eve" we find ourselves in the presence of a person very much like Robert Browning himself (though it is safest to make his acquaintance as a slightly dramatized Robert Browning) who on Christmas Eve visits in turn—whether in the body or out of it matters little—various congregations who have assembled upon this holy evening to worship Christ—each after



its own manner. He first introduces us to a vulgar, bigoted, repulsive company of worshipers in a dingy, bare, unlovely, nonconformist chapel; next, to the prone multitudes who worship through the resplendent symbols of altar, and incense, and crucifix, and aspiring architecture, and mighty music, in Saint Peter's at Rome; and, lastly, to the lecture room of a German university, where bearded students listen with breathless attention to the Christmas Eve discourse of the wan, well-nigh celestial, hawk-nosed, high-cheek-boned, consumptive Professor. In no case has he found edification or been at ease; for he evidently has been trained to the services of the Church of England; but in both Zion Chapel Meeting and the services at Saint Peter's in Rome, in spite of the uncouthness and grotesqueness of the first and the display and servility of the second, he has discovered a redeeming core of faith and love. With the devitalized and rationalistic exercises of the university lecture room, however, he is utterly at variance. With real gusto he gives us an account of how the Professor

proposed inquiring first  
Into the various sources whence  
This Myth of Christ is derivable;  
Demanding from the evidence  
(Since plainly no such life was livable)  
How these phenomena should class?  
Whether 'twere best opine Christ was,

Or never was at all, or whether  
 He was and was not, both together—  
 It matters little for the name,  
 So the idea be left the same.  
 Only, for practical purpose' sake,  
 'Twas obviously as well to take  
 The popular story,—understanding  
     How the ineptitude of the time,  
 And the penman's prejudice, expanding  
     Fact into fable fit for the clime,  
 Had, by slow and sure degrees, translated it  
     Into this myth, this Individuum,—  
 Which when reason had strained and abated it  
     Of foreign matter, left, for residuum,  
 A Man!—a right true man, however,  
 Whose work was worthy a man's endeavor:  
 Work that gave warrant almost sufficient  
     To his disciples for rather believing  
 He was just omnipotent and omniscient,  
     As it gives to us, for as frankly receiving  
 His word, their tradition,—which, though it meant  
 Something entirely different  
 From all that those who only heard it  
 In their simplicity thought and averred it,  
 Had yet a meaning quite as respectable.

Having thus summarized the discourse of the Professor, he addresses himself to battle, with sword, mace, and lance, until he mercilessly bears his antagonist to earth. He accuses him of exhausting the atmosphere of truth atom by atom, until only vacuity is left. What is retained? he asks. Christ's intellect? But other voices have attested equally well mere morality. Indeed, if he were mere man, it was immoral for him to represent himself as God. How comes it, too, that

a wise, good, and simple man such as you represent Christ to have been should have taught so obscurely that where one finds the story to be mere fable a million take it for actual truth? And why should you, and all of his other followers from Peter down, yield fealty to a mere man?

The goodness,—how did he acquire it?  
Was it self-gained, did God inspire it?  
Choose which; then tell me, on what ground  
Should its possessor dare propound  
His claim to rise o'er us an inch?

If Christ had by his own effort gained such goodness as he displayed, we might praise him with pride and joy for teaching us how he kept the mind God gave him so pure from fleshly taint or spot. We might call him a saint, but we should certainly not worship him. Nor should we be one whit more inclined to worship him if he held that his gift of goodness descended from God. For what good gift does not descend from God? But no richest gift, no piling of gift upon gift, can make that creator which was at first mere creature. If, then, Christ is mere man, with rare endowment, what should hinder any holy man so to rise in growth and grandeur of soul as to surpass Christ himself—

From the gift looking to the giver,  
And from the cistern to the river,  
And from the finite to infinity,  
And from man's dust to God's divinity?

Browning's unquestionable conclusion is that to reduce the Christian revelation to a myth is to rob it of its authority and splendor. He holds firmly to the belief that Christ manifest in the flesh was essentially "Lord of Life."

#### WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN

The sign manual of Christian discipleship is love for Christ, and this implies, of course, love for all mankind, and loyalty to all for which Christ stands. Where Christ is love reigns, and love is the only vital tie that connects a Christian to his Lord. Christianity is far more a matter of the heart than of the head. It is the childlike in spirit who finds Jesus, whether a Pippa, a Pompilia, a Pope, or a David; but such special pleaders as Bishop Blougram and such intellectual aristocrats as Cleon have far to go before they can enter the inner fold of Christ. It were better, Browning thinks, to worship him intelligently than to worship him in ignorance, and to wait upon him in chaste and beautiful temples, and through refined and elevated forms and symbols, than to seek communion with him in the midst of sordid and vulgar surroundings, or through materialistic trappings and superstitious mummeries; for he believes our human best is all too poor. But more than all things else he

emphasizes the fact that Christ delights to dwell with all who love him:

So he said, so it befalls.  
 God who registers the cup  
 Of mere cold water, for his sake  
 To a disciple rendered up,  
 Disdains not his own thirst to slake  
 At the poorest love was ever offered:  
 And because my heart I proffered,  
 With true love trembling at the brim,  
 He suffers me to follow him  
 Forever, my own way,—dispensed  
 From seeking to be influenced  
 By all the less immediate ways  
 That earth, in worships manifold,  
 Adopts to reach, by prayer and praise,  
 The garment's hem, which, lo, I hold!  
 . . . . .  
 I will be wise another time,  
 And not desire a wall between us  
 When next I see a church-roof cover  
 So many species of one genus—  
 All the foreheads bearing *lover*  
 Written above the earnest eyes of them.  
 . . . . .  
 Do these men praise him? I will raise  
 My voice up to their point of praise!  
 I see the error; but above  
 The scope of error, see the love,—  
 Oh, love of those first Christian days!

Browning keenly realized the difficulties that beset the pathway of the true Christian, and the sharp temptations that assail him. He was not an ascetic, but he was aware that the world is full of snares for the foot of the unwary Christian, and

that the flesh is prone to betray the spirit in many a crucial hour of life. Nothing could be farther from his own conception of the strenuous and self-sacrificing character of the Christian life than the low, selfish, and relaxing doctrines of the great Bishop Blougram:

I act for, talk for, live for this world now,  
As this world prizes action, life, and talk:  
No prejudice to what next world may prove,  
Whose new laws and requirements, my best pledge  
To observe then, is that I observe these now,  
Shall do hereafter what I do meanwhile.

I'm at ease now, friend; worldly in this world,  
I take and like its way of life; I think  
My brothers, who administer the means,  
Live better for my comfort—that's good too;  
And God, if he pronounce upon such life,  
Approves my service, which is better still.

No one took more delight in the world that now is than did Browning. He knew how to appreciate the slightest gift that the passing days plumped into his outstretched hand. But he was not blinded to comparative values. He rested satisfied in no sensuous or temporal gift; but, knowing well that all things have been planned for the happiness and joy of God's creatures, he accepted the gift of the passing hour gladly as an earnest of what incomparably greater gifts God has in store for his spiritual children. Not for a moment did he confuse sensuous values with spiritual values. In-



deed, so immeasurably apart in value were the two worlds, so strong the seductions of the one as compared with the more remote but sweeter solicitations of the other, and at times so confusing the motives that assailed him as a citizen of both the earthly and the celestial worlds, that he would gladly have chosen the fiery path of the martyr, so that he might once for all attest his unreserved and unalterable allegiance to Christ.

I have denied thee calmly—do I not  
Pant when I read of thy consummate power,  
And burn to see thy calm pure truths outflash  
The brightest gleams of earth's philosophy?  
Do I not shake to hear aught question thee?  
If I am erring save me, madden me,  
Take from me powers and pleasures, let me die  
Ages, so I see thee! I am knit round  
As with a charm by sin and lust and pride,  
Yet though my wandering dreams have seen all shapes  
Of strange delight, oft have I stood by thee—  
Have I been keeping lonely watch with thee  
In the damp night by weeping Olivet,  
Or leaning on thy bosom, proudly less,  
Or dying with thee on the lonely cross,  
Or witnessing thine outburst from the tomb.

---

How very hard it is to be  
A Christian! Hard for you and me,  
—Not the mere task of making real  
That duty up to its ideal,  
Effecting thus, complete and whole,  
A purpose of the human soul—  
For that is always hard to do;  
But hard, I mean, for me and you

To realize it, more or less,  
With even the moderate success  
Which commonly repays our strife  
To carry out the aims of life.

. . . . .  
At first you say, "The whole, or chief  
Of difficulties, is belief.  
Could I believe once thoroughly,  
The rest were simple. What! Am I  
An idiot, do you think,—a beast?  
Prove to me only that the least  
Command of God is God's indeed,  
And what injunction shall I need  
To pay obedience? Death so nigh,  
When time must end, eternity  
Begin,—and cannot I compute,  
Weigh loss and gain together, suit  
My actions to the balance drawn,  
And give my body to be sawn  
Asunder, hacked in pieces, tied  
To horses, stoned, burned, crucified,  
Like any martyr of the list?  
How gladly!—if I make acquist,  
Through the brief minute's fierce annoy,  
Of God's eternity of joy."

In "Easter Day," the poem from which I last quoted, Browning seems to me to be earnestly wrestling with the problem of personal allegiance to the Christian religion—the allegiance of faith and the allegiance of conduct. The speaker in this poem is not the same as the speaker in "Christmas Eve." He seems to be a somewhat different individual in his tastes and predilections. Nor must his individuality be confused with that of the

poet himself. He has deliberately chosen the world. These words, descriptive of him, could never have been truthfully uttered of Browning:

“This finite life, thou hast preferred,  
In disbelief of God’s plain word,  
To heaven and to infinity.

Thou saidst,—‘Let spirit star the dome  
Of sky, that flesh may miss no peak,  
No nook of earth,—I shall not seek  
Its service further!’ ”

Christ shows him that while the beauty and the wonder of nature, the loveliness of the realms of art, the conquests of the mind, the consolations of earthly love, are all pledges and foregleams of God’s good purpose toward him, none of these could completely satisfy his soul. That was created for infinite love, and could be satisfied by nothing else.

Mrs. Orr asserts that this poem “refuses to recognize in poetry, or art, or the attainments of the intellect, or even in the best human love, any practical correspondence with religion.” I think she makes a similar mistake here to the one she makes when she avers that “La Saisiaz” is “conclusive both in form and matter as to his heterodox attitude toward Christianity.” In “La Saisiaz” he chooses to face his problem at its worst—to try it before a strictly intellectual tribunal. But nothing

is more evident in the study of Browning than that he held the heart to be a better inlet to truth than the head; and if he here chooses to make battle in intellectual panoply, in right knightly fashion, he does not renounce the use of sword or dirk if the encounter turn out badly:

"Mine is but man's truest answer—how were it did God respond?"

And so in the poem "Easter Day" we find Browning working under a particular mood toward a specific end. He desires to show that the love of Christ is the white light that sends its radiance into all earthly joys and pursuits, and that all earthly attainments or loves are the prismatic colors into which this pure light is broken as it passes through the prism of the finite soul:

And all thou dost enumerate  
Of power and beauty in the world,  
The mightiness of love was curled  
Inextricably round about.  
Love lay within it and without,  
To clasp thee,—but in vain! Thy soul  
Still shrunk from Him who made the whole,  
Still set deliberate aside  
His love!

#### THE FUTURE LIFE

Belief in a future life is inwoven with every great doctrine that Browning enunciates, and shines forth with varying brilliancy from every masterful poem that he wrote. His philosophy

leads up to it at every point. The soul of man cannot be explained except in the light of a continuous and expanding life. All fragmentary experiences, all aspirations beyond our power to realize, all hopes that cannot be compassed in time, all loves that have been foregone or cut short in this life, all apparent failures, all futile attempts to attain complete knowledge, point alike to a life of perfect fruition. He does not believe that the soul can wholly die. It is his trust that in another world all error may be mended. If life be bereft of the hope of immortality, he looks upon it as a poor cheat, a wretched bungle, and he would, for one, protest "and hurl it back with scorn." He believes that it is not asking too much to require that Nature fill the creature full that she dared to frame hungry for joy, and with limitless desire "to stay its longings vast."

And although he finds comfort in the revelation of eternal life through Christ, and in many poems gives dramatic expression to his faith that Jesus was essentially "Lord of Life," he also frequently deduces the certainty of a continually expanding life from the worth of the gift of life as he knows it here upon the earth, and the inherent necessity of the soul for infinite growth and progress. It does not seem possible to him that there can be any break in the unfolding life of the soul.

Can there ever be one lost good? Is it possible to doubt that God's power can fill the heart that his power expands? Do not the broken arcs on earth require for their completion the perfect circle of heaven? So we find Abt Vogler assuring himself that what is our failure here is "but a triumph's evidence for the fullness of the days"; and Rabbi Ben Ezra, in the confidence that what entered into us was, is, and shall be, merely taking rest in his old age before setting forth upon other adventures brave and new; and the lover shutting a leaf into the sweet, cold hand of the dead Evelyn Hope that she might remember and understand their secret of unspoken love when she awoke to meet him in another life; and Paracelsus upon his death-bed expressing his confidence that, though he stooped into a dark, tremendous sea of cloud, it would be but for a time, since soon or late the lamp of God which he held close pressed against his heart would with its splendor pierce the gloom, so that one day at last he should emerge.

This doctrine of the infinite worth of even the meanest and most abject soul that God ever created merges also into Browning's optimistic belief, or hope, that even the wrongdoer shall eventually be reconciled and brought into unison with God's eternally beneficent ends. Browning gives fas-



cinating treatment to this theme of the ultimate weal or woe of the persistent sinner in "The Ring and the Book" and in "Apparent Failure," and an exposition of these two poems will make his teaching upon this point sufficiently clear.

Guido is as detestable a miscreant as man's genius can depict. What shall be the ultimate fate of such a man? His saintly girl wife, whom he has murdered, thus alludes to him when she comes to die:

We shall not meet in this world nor the next,  
But where will God be absent? In his face  
Is light, but in his shadow healing too:  
Let Guido touch the shadow and be healed!

Caponsacchi—the brave, noble young priest who came to champion Pompilia in her need—desires only that Guido be left to slide out of life despised, spurned, and execrated by all humankind; until, slowly edged off the table-land where life upsprings, he shall be lost in loneliness and silence at creation's verge—"out of the ken of God or care of man, forever and evermore." The great good Pope, who gives the edict for his death, does so in the hope that

So may the truth be flashed out by one blow,  
And Guido see, one instant, and be saved.  
Else I avert my face, nor follow him  
Into that sad obscure sequestered state  
Where God unmakes but to remake the soul  
He else made first in vain; which must not be.

We may suppose that, in the words of both Pompilia and the Pope, Browning gives utterance to his own conviction concerning the fate of such a character as he has described in Guido.

In the poem "Apparent Failure" we find the poet standing in a Paris morgue, where the drowned of Paris are taken for identification, before

The three men who did most abhor  
Their life in Paris yesterday,  
So killed themselves.

Poor, misguided, bedraggled human wretch, each of them! One, a mere boy, dead, perhaps, because he could not be a Buonaparte and claim the Tuileries for his toy; the second an old man, a blood-red socialist and leveler, with his fist still clinched in death; and the last, one who had erred through women and cards and dice: all three a ghastly spectacle of earth's worst wreckage, hauled ashore from the Seine and exposed here to be claimed. Does the spectacle daunt the poet? By no means. He faces the problem at its worst at last, but his faith is equal to the demands made upon it:

My own hope is, a sun will pierce  
The thickest cloud earth ever stretched;  
That, after Last, returns the First,  
Though a wide compass round be fetched;  
That what began best, can't end worst,  
Nor what God blessed once, prove accurst.

## CHAPTER VII

### BROWNING'S INFLUENCE

Ah, that brave  
Bounty of poets, the one royal race  
That ever was, or will be, in this world!  
They give no gift that bounds itself and ends  
I' the giving and the taking: theirs so breeds  
I' the heart and soul o' the taker, so transmutes  
The man who only was a man before,  
That he grows godlike in his turn, can give—  
He also: share the poets' privilege,  
Bring forth new good, new beauty, from the old.

THE poetry of Robert Browning has come to be one of the most potent moral and spiritual forces of our age. His influence is steadily growing. Although from the first there was present in his poetry the authentic note of greatness, he was long ignored, neglected, or misunderstood. He was compelled to create a taste for his own artistic product; and the English-reading public awoke slowly to a recognition of the value and the power of his poetry. Scarcely worse than the neglect to which he was at first doomed was the adulation he was subsequently compelled to suffer. From the hands of the dull and indifferent he was betrayed into the hands of his friends—the illuminated, the seekers after a sign, the specially preordained to re-

ceive and to propagate his message. Of late years, though, Browning has fallen upon better times. More and more the great reading public has become interested in him. A later generation has been better fitted to respond to his peculiar poetic methods and to value and sympathetically appraise the moral and spiritual import of his work. The finest essayists and critics of our day have seriously and intelligently attempted to estimate and interpret his work—neither sparing his delinquencies nor unduly praising his merits. Ministers have popularized his great spiritual teachings in sermons and lectures; skillfully edited selections of his work have been introduced into college courses; lecturers have made his personality and his characteristic doctrines attractive to intelligent lay readers; and literary and social clubs of all kinds have studied his poetry in the same faithful and intelligent manner that they deal with other great writers. The result is that to-day Browning is widely read, fairly well understood, and very potent for good.

Which will the longer perpetuate the fame of Browning—the message which he conveyed through the medium of verse, or the excellence of his achievement in artistic presentation? This question has greatly agitated Browning's critics and biographers, and has brought on more than

one battle above the clouds. My answer to such a question is brief. If Browning is read and treasured a thousand years from now, it will be because his verse contains the essential elements of great poetry—truth, beauty, passion: not truth written down in hard, cold, intellectual form, nor beauty destitute of moral grandeur or spiritual significance, nor passion sordid, unregulated, or depressing; but truth, beauty, and passion wedded and interfused into harmonious and satisfying unity. It is utterly impossible to dissociate the substance of poetry from its form. No enduring poetry—it matters not how sensuous or witching its beauty—lives purely because of its perfection of technique. Nor, on the other hand, is it possible for any thought, however commanding, to win permanent circulation in verse without some grace of expression to commend it. The explanation of this is that no words of haunting sweetness ever immortally knit themselves into the mystic dance of verse save under the impulsion of some potent truth or vital sentiment; and conversely, likewise, it is impossible that there should be any thought of commanding value or any emotion of transcendent worth that will not sooner or later attract to itself, by laws as irresistible as those of light or gravitation, literary expression of such felicity and conjuring power as to



win for it an imperishable place in the souls of men. Poetry possesses absolute worth to the degree that the great truths and emotions of life have thus once for all taken to themselves the vestments of technical expression in which it was preordained that they should array themselves. A truth once adequately spoken is spoken forever. A truth not yet made comfortable upon men's lips will never cease paining the souls of true poets.

Now, Browning wrote about many important things in a wretchedly bad manner; he wrote about some comparatively insignificant things in a very happy manner; and wrote about some amazingly uninteresting things in an astoundingly annoying manner. And I suppose that, if we should add together all that he wrote in one or the other of these three faulty manners, we should have a total of something more than one half of all that he produced. So I do not doubt that the vessel which carries his fame down to remote posterity will, within a century or two, have lightened itself of a number of such cumbersome pieces of cargo as "Sordello," "Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau," "Red Cotton Night-Cap Country," "Mr. Sludge 'the Medium,'" and "Jochanan Hakkadosh." But how beyond value the argosy with which it shall continue its course! What shall we say of the priceless gems and ingots, the costly bales and rich



stuffs that remain? What of "Saul," and "Pippa Passes," and "Abt Vogler," and "Andrea del Sarto," and "Rabbi Ben Ezra," and "Cleon," and "Luria," and "Summum Bonum," and "Love among the Ruins," and "Evelyn Hope," and "Two in the Campagna," and portions of "The Ring and the Book"? to say nothing of fragments and nuggets scattered everywhere in abundance sufficient to furnish wares for a whole fleet of less ambitious craft.

My conclusion is, then, that Browning will be remembered a thousand years hence not for his message specifically, nor his intellectual subtlety, nor his new method in poetry, nor his exquisite technique. He will be treasured, rather, because he has written inimitably upon imperishable themes; because he has touched with exquisite skill the largest and most thrilling interests of the human soul. His fame will not be enhanced by his neglect of any detail of artistic beauty; nor will it suffer loss because he has chosen to treat the higher intellectual and spiritual interests of man. The only product that will survive will be that in which form and content conspire together for the delight and profit of mankind.

One secret, of course, of Browning's tremendous influence lies in his personality. Few English poets have had greater original endowments—more force and independence of character. His

personality was symmetrical and well-rounded, too. He was alive at every point, and was continually in full possession of his powers. His senses were alert and penetrating. He saw quickly, and saw accurately and deeply. His intellect was at once penetrating, tenacious, and versatile. He was curious about everything, and he forgot nothing. He was clever to a degree, yet side by side with prankish, roguish, dare-devil qualities of mind we find sanity, balance, and seriousness that suggest comparison with the greatest minds that ever busied themselves with poetry. Unlike many of the most gifted and brilliant British poets, Coleridge, Burns, Byron, Shelley, he was able to bring all the riotous and varied tendencies of his genius under the control of his will. What volcanic upheavals of sense, or contrary winds of passion, or false lights of intellect he had to contend with, it is impossible to estimate. That he had to battle fiercely with such experiences we cannot doubt. But Will was a steady helmsman upon whom he could rely. His sympathies were catholic, responsive, and humane; his emotional interests and susceptibilities world-wide. His soul vibrated like an Æolian harp to every wind of feeling that stirs the world of human hearts. He was insensible neither to the humor nor the pathos of life. His humor was more robust and

high-spirited than penetrating and delicate; his pathos was manly, restrained, and free from sentimentality. His supreme passion was for the imperishable things of the Spirit; and, as we have seen, his great poems are those that deal with the crucial experiences of men and women when they are brought face to face with choices that are to affect their welfare, for weal or for woe, throughout time and eternity. He has, finally, an originality and power of imagination that lifts him at times into the highest realms of creative work, enkindling, harmonizing, and glorifying all of his other endowments, and issuing in perfect productions of art.

A quality of Browning's temper that commends his poetry to rugged and serious natures is his faithfulness to facts; his courage in facing all the issues of life. Though an optimist and a romanticist he was endowed with a robust common sense and downright honesty that made it impossible for him to ignore or evade reality. Indeed, this temper has been characteristic of nearly all his great contemporaries. They have all been earnest and serious men whom nothing could satisfy save the sternest reality. From Wordsworth down they have had a passion for verities and an unmistakable contempt for sham and pretense. Cost what it might, they have insisted upon press-

ing home to the very heart of truth. "To look steadily at the object" is the way Wordsworth phrases it. Carlyle declares that it is the duty of the hero to bring men back to reality, "to force them to penetrate beneath the surface, to teach them to stand upon things and not upon the shows of things." Ruskin insists upon utter faithfulness to nature and demands that the artist reject nothing, select nothing, scorn nothing. The result has been that Browning, in common with the other great writers of the nineteenth century, has unflinchingly faced, and fearlessly accepted, the problems of science, the problems of social life, and the problems of the moral consciousness. Never before in the history of literature have the consequences of moral infirmity been set forth with such inevitable force, neither have the darker and more terrifying aspects of the moral and religious life been so resolutely confronted, so remorselessly analyzed, as by George Eliot, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Robert Browning. No specter of the soul has been allowed to pass without challenge, no lurking spirit of doubt or despair that has not been tracked to its den and dragged into the open light of day.

Be it said, then, to his praise that he did not "stand upon the shows of things," but pressed inward until he found firm footing upon things

themselves. He found that there was no reality save spirit. He found that the abiding and universal interests of the human race have been its faiths, and loves, and joys, and aspirations. And was he not correct in his findings? What has life offered so absorbingly and perennially real as these? What man is a stranger to them, or indifferent to them? The interests that have been most constant and universal have not been of the earth, earthy. Men have most tenaciously set their affections upon things which are above, not upon things which are upon the earth. Cold and hunger, cord and gibbet, flame and torture, have seemed less real to the human race than have love, and faith, and hope. And ten thousand times over has this been proven by hero and saint, by devoted mother and inspired philosopher; for the real is the spiritual, and spirit plumes its wings to try immortal worlds.

Browning's great poetry thus habitually touches life at its highest points. He appreciates justly the values of life and lays the stress where it should be laid. If we compare his poetry with the poetry of Byron, and Keats, and Mr. Swinburne, and Mr. Stephen Phillips, we do not affirm that their poetry is bad and that his is good. It is a matter, rather, of good poetry and poetry that is much better. For the poet who feeds our higher nature is the



poet who claims our deepest gratitude and affection. We do not reject the song that makes the blood dance faster through our veins, or the lyric that thrills us with its sensuous beauty, or the romantic tale that fills up some painful or languorous hour, or the ode that sometimes, lapping our spirits in forgetfulness or summer dreams, brings us welcome reprieve from life's "sore spell of toil." But our unstinted and undying gratitude we reserve for the poet who, finding us disconsolate, comforts us; who, finding us disheartened and ready to yield, sounds the note of advance for us; who, finding us recreant to our trust and disloyal to our aspirations, uncovers for us once more the ideal that has been temporarily obscured. It is he who stays our feet amid the whirling waters of temptation; who sets the stars of faith and love and hope in our benighted sky, and who whispers to us in our lonely and nerveless moments of despair the heartening message of God and immortality. And all these Browning does. He is a good Samaritan to us in our need.

He does more than this. He does what all great poets and prophets do—stirs within us, somehow, a new and larger sense of life. He reclaims in some measure the waste places of existence and arouses sluggish hearts to a realization of unguessed capacities. Rejecting outworn and exter-



nal standards of authority, our poets and seers seek their inspiration from within, and create new worlds according to the deep instincts of their own nature. The indescribable charm and potency of these great spirits lie in the fact of their clear perception and vigorous affirmation of an ideal universe, a world invisible to fleshly eyes and intangible to fingers of earth, yet immeasurably more *real* than any that has ever attested itself to the five senses. All men at some time, and some men at all times, feel themselves to be a part of such an imperishable spiritual order; but to most of us, weak, proud, ignorant men that we are, come only stray flashes of light and hazy adumbrations from those truths that forever live for us, yet forever elude us. But to our poets and prophets has been granted the steady and penetrating gaze that sees from center to circumference. Our poets have been men of faith and men of vision, and without fear or guile they have given us accurate transcripts of reality as it has appeared to them. "Philosophy," says Emerson, "is still rude and elementary. It will one day be taught by poets. The poet is in the natural attitude—he is believing; the philosopher after some struggle having only reasons for believing." This has been true of Emerson himself, and has been no less true of Browning. Sane in intellect and true at heart, he

implicitly trusted the deeper instincts of his being, and, unhampered by dogma, custom, or tradition, viewed the world and the problems of life in fresh relations. He looked upon life as its own interpreter, and deemed it as human, as essential, and as much a discovery of the real, to love, to will, to trust, and to aspire, as to know. He pointed men to God as the ground of all being; asserted the inalienable worth and dignity of the human soul, and affirmed those fundamental instincts and promptings

which, be they what they may,  
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,  
Are yet a master light of all our seeing.

And, finally, more convincingly and adequately, I think, than any other poet ever did it, he set forth all that is involved in the Christian religion. To the fact that his poetry is saturated with the Christian idea is due, in large measure, its stimulating, enlarging, and life-giving quality. He was a Christian by the necessities of his nature. As we have seen, his starting point was ever the human soul. He perceived in man's life such vast worth, dignity, and significance that he felt obliged to study and interpret it in the light of some truth or hypothesis adequate to explain its infinitely rich possibilities and implications. His vision of the infinite value and promise of human life was

immediate and convincing. How account for its value and provide for the perfect development of its capabilities?

Christianity, and Christianity alone, solved this question for Browning. He found in Christ all that his nature sought. The humanity of Christ met and responded to his humanity; the divinity of Christ afforded him the necessary connecting link with the infinite and the eternal. So we find Browning's philosophy of life through and through a Christian philosophy of life. He teaches that service is the pure gold of this life, and that it matters little into what denomination it be coined if only it be kept in circulation. He asserts that the human spirit can never satisfy itself save with the perfect and imperishable. He shows that progress and growth are essential to man's nature; and that, therefore, he must not expect in this earthly life to find full satisfaction for either mind or heart. But he assures him of conscious immortality and endless progress in the world to come; and teaches that there is an ineradicable religious instinct within all men that prompts them to seek God:

Just when we are safest, there's a sunset-touch,  
A fancy from a flower-bell, some one's death,  
A chorus-ending from Euripides,—  
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears  
As old and new at once as nature's self,  
To rap and knock and enter in our soul,

Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring,  
Round the ancient idol, on his base again,—  
The grand Perhaps! We look on helplessly.  
There the old misgivings, crooked questions are—  
This good God,—what he could do, if he would,  
Would, if he could—then must have done long since:  
If so, when, where, and how? some way must be,—  
Once feel about, and soon or late you hit  
Some sense, in which it might be, after all.  
Why not "The Way, the Truth, the Life"?

He believes, too, in the power of the practical reason to will the truth when the scales of speculative reason balance—inclining neither way; and with unwearied zest and unfailing beauty he asserts his belief in God's boundless love and good will toward men.

He accepted the life and teachings of Christ as adequate, authoritative, and supreme in the spiritual realm; held that his system of morals far outshone the wisest philosophies of earth; and found in his example and utterances such moral incentive and life-giving power as attested his authentic divinity. And he gave expression to this faith with moving effect throughout his poetry. He loved and worshiped Christ as well as trusted him; so his pages frequently glow with spiritual fervor and emotion. His faith was the robust expression of his whole manhood, and was so strong and assured that he is able to seize the groping hands of weaker men and draw

them up to where he has himself found firm ground for his feet. We feel that it is the strong faith and conviction of Browning himself that wings with fiery energy the words of the worldly (though not altogether unbelieving) bishop to his skeptical interlocutor:

Once own the use of faith, I'll find you faith.  
 We're back on Christian ground. You call for faith:  
 I show you doubt, to prove that faith exist  
 The more of doubt, the stronger faith, I say,  
 If faith o'ercomes doubt. How I know it does?  
 By life and man's free will, God gave for that!  
 To mold life as we choose it, shows our choice:  
 That's our one act, the previous work's his own.

“What think ye of Christ,” friend? when all's done and  
 said,

Like you this Christianity, or not?  
 It may be false, but will you wish it true?  
 Has it your vote to be so if it can?  
 Trust you an instinct silenced long ago  
 That will break silence and enjoin you love  
 What mortified philosophy is hoarse,  
 And all in vain, with bidding you despise?  
 If you desire faith—then you've faith enough:  
 What else seeks God—nay, what else seek ourselves?









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